

What Went Wrong for Us?

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Naruto & Sakura should, SHOULD, be happy with their lives as Hokage and as an Uchiha respectively. But the reality is far from perfect. Naruto's joke of a marriage to Hinata and Sakura's stressful life reaching a breaking point could be enough to make them re-evaluate where their lives are and where they went wrong. Divorce fic, NaruSaku, anti-ending, anti-SS, anti-NH.

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Chapter 1

The late-afternoon sun set over Konoha. The village's quiet appearance belied what was going on in the Hokage's household.

Naruto Uzumaki, the Seventh Hokage, son of the Fourth, Minato Namikaze, the Hero of the Hidden Leaf, Child of Prophecy and Savior of the World, the Gutsy Ninja, et cetera, et cetera, didn't feel like either one of those. He hadn't felt like his old self in years. Although people change when they age, which he understood, the collapse of everything he thought he held dear was different from the normal aging process. But he didn't know that at this specific moment.

He sat across from his wife Hinata at their dinner table. She was sewing. She'd started sewing before they'd gotten together on a mission to save her sister. She knitted a scarf for him. That scarf sat in on the coat rack, a bit frayed but still in good enough shape that he often wore it to work. He appreciated it, he really did. At least he wanted to. It was a kind gesture from someone kind and lonely like he was for the longest time, and... where was he going with this?

He rapped his fingers on the table. The ramen bowl in front of him had gone cold and he'd barely touched it. He searched his mind for the problem, but came up emptier than... an empty ramen bowl. He cursed himself for his inability to find a good analogy. This probably wasn't as big as the rut he was in, since he wasn't really a writer.

Rut?

He thought that word over in his mind, stirring his ramen at the same time. Hinata still didn't look up. She was still engrossed in her sewing. Naruto couldn't bring himself to interrupt her.

Maybe he just wasn't used to how quiet it was. Boruto had been going out on missions more often. Not that it mattered as much;

Boruto would probably reject an offer to visit Ichiraku's or Kakashi. He understood the boy had his own ideals and goals different from him, but he did wish Boruto showed him more respect than what he gave him now.

Hinata still wasn't looking up at him. Why? Besides obviously being engrossed in her sewing, of course. That was the likeliest reason.

The Hokage kept toying with his food. The ramen itself looked delicious; it was a chicken-flavored broth with chicken pieces, cabbages, a narutomaki-his namesake-and two deviled egg slices. Hinata obviously put some thought into the ramen, and he was genuinely thankful to her. But was that enough? They'd been married for over a decade and had two kids, which would make most people happy. But he didn't know why he was so miserable.

He was sure he was burnt out. The village was growing at a substantial rate, hi-rises were being built on the fringes, the economy was pretty strong for a peacetime, and a new generation of ninjas were preparing to start their careers. That was good, right? He cursed himself again for letting that doubt creep back into his thoughts.

"Hey, Hinata?" he asked. "Should I be happier?"

"Of course, Naruto," she replied without looking up from her knitting. "You achieved your dream to be Hokage."

Dreams. Dreams were a funny thing. Becoming Hokage wasn't so much a dream, as a desire to be recognized for the wonder he was, but now it felt just a little empty. Oh, he did have dreams where he was Hokage as a kid. Most of his dreams as of late were the usual dream, just a bunch of random images that he would forget in the morning. He'd always wonder just what he'd dreamt when he woke up. But even then, with his dream achieved, and the usual randomness he'd come to expect, he'd have a few dreams that not only stuck with him, but disturbed him to a minor extent whenever he had them.

Like a dream where he was on Mount Myouboku, but the frogs didn't seem to want him there. They were always welcoming when he was awake, but this particular dream was different. The frogs looked like frogs, but they didn't have the usual frog eyes. He could see people's eyes in them. That's not the best way to describe it. The toads' and frogs' eyes were human eyes, all staring at him with disapproval, anger and hate in them. He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen such hatred from someone's eyes, but it was a long time ago; when he was 12. So he did remember, but the specific moments were harder to conjure up as he got older. Worse still, even Gamamaru glared at him, but not with his old eyes.

His eyes were open, and they had a familiarity about them. Naruto had seen them before, and he recognized whose eyes they were. But acknowledging whose eyes they were were out of the question. His shame in the dream, causing him to look away from Gamamaru's silent glare felt like thousands of kunai embedding in his soul. Worse still, Gamamaru's shape shifted outside his gaze, taking a familiar form that he desperately wanted to go away. But it wasn't just that one form, but several forms that just worked his guilt and shame, until he saw a small figure in an orange jumpsuit.

"Naruto?" Hinata's voice brought him back to reality. She was staring at him out of concern, but that concern felt empty and shallow.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he said. "Just got lost for a minute. What was your dream?" This wasn't an out-of-the-blue, earth-shattering question, but he'd ask it before.

"To be by your side," she said without a second thought or looking up from her knitting.

Of course. She always answered that way. It was romantic at first, but it didn't feel that way now. Maybe that was why he didn't talk to her as much as he should be. He'd been going right to bed after returning from the office without speaking to her, Boruto or Himawari. Hima didn't seem to mind as much, although he once caught the

glimpse of a sad face from her. Boruto, however, drew graffiti on his effigy on the Hokage Rock. It drove him crazy when he did that, since it took valuable time out of his already-busy schedule...

There was supposed to be an epiphany there, but he stubbornly shoved it aside.

Not wanting to let the ramen go to waste, he quietly slurped some of the noodles. He didn't think there were any easy answers at the moment, or they would come to him when he talked to others.

But for now, he just ate what he could. He didn't know it would eventually come to him down the line.

Currently he felt like he was about to go to sleep at any moment. So he ate faster so he could finish the ramen. Once he was done, he thanked his wife, but she only responded with a flat "You're welcome". Getting up, he put the bowl away and left for the bedroom.

"You're going to bed again?" Hinata asked.

"I'm tired," he replied.

"You're always tired," she objected. "Boruto and Himawari want their dad."

But it didn't faze Naruto, he just slunk back to his bed. He changed into his pajamas and fell into the bed.

The window was still open and he could hear the faint street sounds from his room.

Lately he'd been able to right to sleep whenever he hit the bed, but not this afternoon. Staring up at the ceiling, he felt he was too tired to stay out of bed, but not tired enough to go to sleep. This dull, daily grind/routine had gone on for so long, he feared he was letting his skills rust. As a teen, he'd constantly train and work harder to

improve himself, even though Jiraiya considered him the Child of Prophecy. Maybe he could take a short break in the coming weeks so he could train some more and keep his skills up. Right now, he was too tired. He wanted to sleep.

And he kept seeing disapproving eyes whenever he closed his eyes. Or they were just those little colors you see when you close your eyes. To test this, he kept his eyes open for a couple minutes, and then he closed them. The eyelid colors appeared at first, then dissipated. He opened his eyes and closed them again. The colors were there. He was beginning to feel relieved, when those eyes stared back at him.

They weren't demonic or monstrous eyes. Nor did they have the purple rings of Infinite Tsukiyomi in them. But they were human eyes, blue ones, to be specific. And then they changed. They were more masculine now-they were feminine?-but still blue.

He opened his eyes, and saw that the other eyes were gone. His skin glistened from the faint layer of sweat that had already accumulated, and he knew he was sweating because he could feel it. Not wanting to admit what he'd seen, he closed his eyes again. The colors came and dissipated, and then the eyes-

"WAKE UP, OLD MAN!"

Naruto shot upright. His heart almost stopped. Whipping his head to the right, he saw Boruto standing in the window, with a proud and triumphant pose.

"What?!" He breathed. "YOU ALMOST GAVE ME A HEART ATTACK!"

"Phuh!" Boruto scoffed. "Look at you, already going to bed?! It's not even 7 o'clock!" Naruto didn't look at his son, but he could tell he wore a smug-ish grin. However, it disappeared quickly, because Naruto's shock turned to anger. And although he could see the real

fear in his son's eyes, his anger with Boruto clouded his ability to see this.

"BORUTO, I TOLD YOU NEVER TO BOTHER ME LIKE THAT AGAIN, YOU INSOLENT LITTLE BRAT!" he roared, climbing out of bed, stomping over to Boruto and grabbing the boy's collar. "LEAVE ME ALONE!"

For a moment, he saw the boy's frightened expression. He paused. And that gave Boruto the opening he needed to twist himself out of Naruto's grip. Naruto could only watch as Boruto spun and jumped away from the Hokage's house. Still holding his hand out, Naruto backed away from the window and turned back to the bed. The boy's look of true fear replayed in his mind. *What have I done?* He thought to himself, still unsure why he had yelled at Boruto.

He found Hinata standing in the doorway, looking quizzically at him. "Is something wrong?" she asked.

"No," he said, "Nothing's wrong. I'm just tired." Climbing back into bed and shutting his eyes, he willed himself to sleep without any dreams.

He did catch a glimpse of pink, though.

Clutching the sheet of paper in one hand, Sakura Uchiha clutched her hair in the other. Sarada hadn't come home yet, but that wasn't the cause of Sakura's stress at all. Tens of other paper sheets covered her table. Fighting back tears, she dared to look at the paperwork pile, but couldn't even last a second before looking back up. She felt like everything was crumbling around her, like she was a complete failure, and she should've been more reflective when she was younger.

So much was going wrong, so much had changed since then. She used to think that she was going to be on top of the world; that she and Sasuke would make the greatest fighting duo this side of

Tsunade and Jiraiya, and maybe even better. For a while, she was positive she was going to be the greatest Medical Ninja in Konoha's history, and maybe even make a big medical breakthrough!

Now she was facing foreclosure on her dilapidated house, the loss of her status as a medical ninja, no money in her bank account, almost lost her daughter to someone she didn't know, and the growing frustration of Sasuke's constant desertion. So much that built up for years, and now was hitting her from every single direction in the last couple of months, mixing with these latest stresses. She felt less like Tsunade's successor and more like a joke. Everyone liked to say she was useless, after all.

She was still convinced that Sasuke would return and they would pick up where they left off. She'd fallen in love with him, and she knew that her heart could not be changed. Nor would she be a good person if she stopped waiting for him. She'd gone through hell to get him back, and she was going to stay the course, but... but... but... she loved him, dammit! It would be wrong to just up and abandon him! And he had a reason for not coming back. He was protecting them from any dangers that might come their way. Kagura was a threat who had to be dealt with.

Without thinking, she reached for the sake bottle off to her left, but stopped herself. Was she *that* desperate?

She couldn't answer that herself. She did know that she wanted a different life from this; this lousy excuse of barely eking an existence out, living on the last remnants of Uchiha money that the village didn't touch.

That would have to wait for now, because she heard her door opening. She couldn't let her daughter see the mess, so she hastily organized the table as best she could, and placed the foreclosure warning face-down.

"Mom?" Sarada called.

"Welcome home, honey!" Sakura called, entering the front room.
"How was training today?"

"Sempai Konohamaru made us work on our basic jutsus again," Sarada answered while removing her boots. "Ugh, I'm so tired of them! We're falling behind!"

"Why?" Sakura asked.

"That stupid Boruto!" Sarada answered again, her voice full of pure contempt. "He's the worst! If he weren't the Hokage's son, he'd have been kicked out of the Academy by now!"

"He's your teammate," Sakura replied. "You should cut him some slack." She briefly recalled a similar conversation she had with Tsunade about Naruto. And he was Hokage now, and while she was proud of him, something in the back of her mind made her feel like she'd missed out on something or something else. She never had eyes for him, only Sasuke, and that's what she knew.

But that nagging in the back of her mind was still there. Something had gone wrong.

"Mom, are you alright?"

She didn't realize that she got lost in thought, and her daughter brought her back to her senses. "I'm sorry," she said.

"I hate when you get lost."

"I didn't mean to."

"You're acting weird."

"No I'm not. Anyway, I'll be getting dinner ready. Why don't you go get changed?"

"Sure," Sarada answered, picking her weapons up and starting towards her bedroom. Then she stopped to look at the table. She

could see all the sheets on table, but Sakura caught her just in time to gently shepherd her away from the kitchen. "What's going on?"

"Nothing, nothing!" Sakura awkwardly chuckled. "Everything's fine, nothing to worry about! Say, you smell funny. Maybe you should take a bath, and get that smell out of your-"

"MOM!"

Stunned a little, Sakura held her hands up to her completely embarrassed, bright-red daughter. Now mother was as embarrassed as daughter. And Sarada was too embarrassed to say anything else, so she walked away from her mom, or more specifically, power-walked to quickly get away, but not offend her mother.

Sakura sighed, relieved that Sarada hadn't seen all the paperwork on the table. But how long could she hide all of this from her? She would find out soon, either from her peers teasing her about it in school, from Sakura herself or from some other source. She could handle it coming from Tsunade or her parents, since they could-emphasis on *could* -help her out in the pinch.

But just because they could didn't mean she knew they will.

Too much was going on. So much in fact, that she went back into the kitchen without thinking. The sight of the bills and letters brought her back into reality, but the shock made her feel light-headed.

She needed to sit down.

She was also supposed to start preparing dinner. Earlier today she'd considered chicken teriyaki or ramen, but making the chicken would take time and she only had ramen cups that were neither filling nor had any nutritional value for a growing preteen. She wondered how anyone besides a certain blond Hokage could eat all of that fake ramen and not get sick. It was inhumanly possible, especially with all the sodium. At least Naruto had a good wife to cook him good meals.

What am I thinking? She asked herself. Who cares about Naruto? Why am I still thinking of him?! I've got more important things to worry about.

She looked back down at the papers covering her table and thought to herself. She knew she needed money, and badly. She could try to get her old hospital job back, but that was going to be hard when she was worried that her skills were rustier than a knife left out in a weeklong rainstorm. But she did keep her skills sharp on Sarada whenever she got sick. That was good enough, right? She could at least use her connections to Tsunade to get that job. She'd be a doctor or a nurse. It didn't matter because she'd be financially sound to keep her house and pay the bills. Sarada would have to get used to coming home when her mom wasn't there.

Her mom. She groaned, wondering if her own mother even wanted to see her. She wasn't happy when she married Sasuke. She called him a murderer. He wasn't a murderer, he just... he was just misunderstood! He'd been through a lot, so of course he would lash out at the world that had wronged him! He was, he was...

She felt light-headed again, and it forced her to sit down. She still couldn't think of anything to make, and that worsened her stress. Without thinking, she reached out, grabbed the snake bottle, opened it and chugged almost a tenth of it before she finally stopped. The taste didn't matter. And now she felt even more lightheaded. She took another chug. She could barely see in front of her, nor her daughter walking in on her to see her taking a third drink.

"MOM!" she cried as she ran over to her. Sakura looked up and finally saw her daughter through her drunken haze, fully aware that Sarada was horrified to see her mother like this. Unable to keep herself together, she broke down and cried loudly while her daughter came over to comfort her.

Ok, some um, if you've read the summary you'll probably know what I think about the ending, so I'll just make it clear that I want to write

something better than what we got. Even if I was only a casual fan and never delved that deep into it, I was still unhappy. So I'm going to try to write this short story to fix it.

And before you review, I know the pacing isn't great and it's a little short and a little rushed. But I hope you liked it, anyway!

Chapter 2

Naruto could hardly sleep after yelling at Boruto. Not only did he not see the boy come back in after the incident, Hinata barely talked to him when she finally came to bed. Instead, she got dressed, brushed her hair and teeth and climbed right into bed without so much as a peep in his direction. He doubted that she thought he was asleep, despite not saying anything. Although that hardly mattered when he knew that she was probably cross that he yelled at their son. But she just got into bed, read a book and didn't say anything. He vaguely remembered Jiraiya telling him that great couples don't have to say anything, their communication and bond is so good. This was probably not one of those situations. He knew she was angry with him.

That didn't mean he couldn't do anything. In the back of his mind, he hoped that he could rescue the situation and get back in Hinata's good graces. But he was also deeply concerned that he'd done far too much harm to earn it. He hadn't apologized to Boruto, after all, and it had hurt him as much as it hurt his son. He had heard Boruto wailing loudly about an hour after he got back, and he wanted him to stop. It was all his fault, of course. He knew it.

Still, it was better to try something than do nothing.

Pretending wake up, he turned to Hinata on his left. She was still sewing. "I knew you were awake," she said coldly. "Why did you yell at my son?"

He didn't have a reason or an excuse. So he didn't answer.

Wait, *her* son? Okay, it was certainly true. But her voice sounded possessive, and again, for good reason, but it sounded accusatory like she believed he didn't regret it and irrevocably hated Boruto.

"I don't hate him," he answered.

"Did I say that?" she asked.

"No," he replied.

"There where did you get that from?"

"I dunno."

"You need to apologize to him."

"I don't think he's ready."

She stopped, although Naruto doubted that she was done with the conversation. She might just be giving him the silent treatment. There wasn't much he could do in this case except wait for her to decide to talk to him again. But she didn't speak for several long, agonizing minutes. The only sound that came from her side of the bed was the clicking and clacking of her sewing needles. At times they could sound like a clock ticking.

"I'm sorry, Naruto," she said. "I shouldn't speak out of place. It's not for me to do."

Surprised by this, although she'd done it before, he turned to stare at her. She kept knitting, humming a light melody. This didn't sit well with Naruto.

"I'm the one who should be sorry," he said. "I'll try to make it up to him tomorrow. I'll take him to Ichiraku's."

"Don't worry about it," she said.

This wasn't right and Naruto knew it. For now he was too tired to keep the conversation going, and he quickly fell asleep.

He was young again; not just young, but his age when he, Sakura and Sasuke defeated Madara and saved everyone from the nightmare that was the Infinite Tsukiyomi. In fact, they were just

about to do battle with Kaguya in her Truth Ball form. They were truly reunited after almost four years separate in some shape or form. He could feel his heart pounding against its to cage, feeling as ready to go as he was. He knew they could get the job done. Even if his wariness of Sasuke was justified to an extent, there was no one else he trusted to fight alongside in the clutch. "You ready, guys!?" he shouted.

No answer.

Great dread overtook him. Sasuke was gone. Sakura floated lifelessly in front of him, except her eyes. They were fixed on him. He looked around. Jiraiya, Tsunade, Iruka-sensei, Minato and Kushina all surrounded him, each sharing Sakura's lifelessness and eyes staring right at him. Those eyes followed where he went.

Then, hundreds of White Zetsus marched past him in formation, their eyes fixed dead ahead. Dolls and puppets joined them. Their faces morphed, turning into different people. They all shared the same, lifeless expression as the five currently confronting Naruto. Fear and dread began to fill him. The endlessly marching puppets changed again, turning into real people this time. His horror worsened. He recognized some of them; Haku, Zabuza, Neji, Itachi, some others that he could not recognize either. Their steady, lifeless march chilled his bones.

The marchers turned their heads to him. He looked away. He saw he was his current age now, dressed as the Hokage. His face glistened with cold sweat. The marchers had stopped marching. Now they turned to face him. More people joined them. He turned to run, but he was surrounded on all sides. They didn't say anything, but their deafening silence caused him to drop to his knees and cover his head. He tried begging for forgiveness. But he said nothing. He tried again. He looked up. He turned white as chalk.

Everyone, even the first five, and Sasuke, now closed in on him. He had nowhere to run. They mobbed him, swirling him around like he was in a whirlpool. He reached for the black sky, silently screaming

for help, but none came. He sank deeper and deeper. Now Boruto and Himawari had joined the mob. And to his horror, Hinata appeared before him. But instead of helping him, she watched as the massive, endless mob consumed him until he was nothing.

He woke up covered in sweat. Although he didn't vault upright at first, he did so on his own. He tried to remember certain details of the dream before he forgot it, like the endless marching dead. But it was still pretty dark, so he was going to have to find a pen and paper without waking Hinata up. He remembered the candle on the desk opposite the bed, so he got up and moved over to the desk. He lit the candle, got out a piece of paper and started writing down what he remembered. Now, he wasn't entirely sure why he felt like he needed to do this, just that he had to.

He quickly finished. It was still the Hour of the Ox. He folded the paper up, put it in his Hokage cloak, blew the candle out and gently got back into bed. Hinata was still fast asleep. He did kiss her forehead, but it felt like routine, not actual affection. That being said, he quickly fell asleep himself.

He dreamed again, but this time it was just a bunch of random images that he immediately forgot 30 seconds after waking up. He was relieved to know this, as normal dreams were getting rare. Or at least felt rare.

He'd settled into his simple morning routine a couple of years ago. First he got up, then he bathed, then he got dressed and then he had breakfast.

Breakfast was, as you can probably guess, really awkward.

He sat next from Boruto at the table, Hinata across from him and Himawari to his right. Boruto did everything he could to not look at his father, like turning away with his soup bowl so that he'd be looking at his mom instead. Naruto deduced he thought he had his

mom as an ally. It was his usual tactic, and he employed it often. Especially when he was quite obviously terrified of his father, for good reason. Yes, yelling at Boruto was still eating at Naruto. He was going to apologize. But he needed to get his attention first.

"Could you pass the rice, Boruto?" he asked.

Boruto passed the rice, but didn't look at him. Okay, then.

"Did you sleep well last night?"

Boruto ignored him.

"Do you want to talk?"

Without warning, or perhaps, with some warning if you count how he gave his father the cold shoulder, Boruto got up from the table, picked up his bag, went straight for the door and bolted outside right as Naruto caught on to his actions. Instead of chasing him, Naruto stood in the door frame, watching Boruto getting smaller and smaller until he was out of sight. The Hokage sighed and cursed himself for letting him go.

"Daddy, what happened?" Himawari asked. "Why was big brother so scared?"

"Because I did something wrong," he answered. "I guess now that Boruto's gone off, I should be going myself."

"Take care," Hinata replied. Naruto grabbed his Hokage cloak and hat, and was soon on his way to his office.

Sakura did not have anywhere near the kind of sleep Naruto had, although she did heavily cry when she got to bed. Her guilt for downing three gulps of sake was palpable. So palpable, in fact, that she also had some bad dreams.

She remembered drifting around the village, encountering injured people throwing angrier glares at her wherever she went. People were poisoned, suffering from kunai wounds, losing limbs, getting sick, and dying of other maladies that she knew that she could heal. But she couldn't do anything. She tried to help, but no matter what she did, she kept giving them something worse; Sasuke's curse mark and a sharingan. Or they simply didn't heal.

She couldn't bear it anymore. That was when she woke up, and immediately regretted it, because the pounding headache of a hangover struck. Using a special jutsu that she picked up from watching Tsunade, she relieved her headache, but that probably wouldn't help the light sensitivity. Or her embarrassment when Sarada saw her again.

So she got out of bed and rounded up all the sake in the house, which turned out to be 3 bottles plus ceremonial sake, and poured all of it besides the ceremonial sake down the drain. Her timing was also good, because Sarada happened to walk in as she was finishing up with the second sake bottle. She looked visibly disappointed at first, but seeing her mom dumping the sake instantly cheered her up.

"Are you seriously doing that?"

"Yeah," Sakura answered.

"Why?"

"Because I know I'm better than this," Sakura answered back.

"And then what?"

Sarada's innocent question went unanswered. Not because Sakura didn't want to answer, but because she *couldn't* answer. She stayed still above the sink, thinking about what would come next, and-

"Mom? What's this?"

Sakura spun around. Sarada was visibly shaken and shaking, holding a piece of paper in her hand. Sakura's eyes widened, and horror spread on her face. Desperately, she reached and grabbed the paper out of Sarada's hand, but she didn't toss it. Still, the damage was done. Sarada had seen something, and Sakura feared the worst. She had to get her out of the house as soon as possible, without worsening Sarada's suspicions.

"What do you want for breakfast?" she asked.

"Just some toast," Sarada answered, although Sakura was positive this wouldn't be the end of it. She knew she could only delay it a little bit until she could find a solution. She would also have to make Sarada's lunch, and that might take some time. She was up to the challenge, of course, so long as she could keep her daughter's attention away from the bills for now. (As for why Sarada didn't notice them last night, the simplest answer was because Sarada was so focused on her mother. But she also might've just waited for her to get up to confront her on the bills.)

She hid the bills while Sarada wasn't looking, while making breakfast and lunch at the same time. She walked a tight rope, though. A wrong move could catch Sarada's eye, or Sarada would catch a glimpse of the paperwork. The toast was made quickly, but the bento box would take time. And as Sakura found out, making a bento with a hangover was harder than it should be, even without the headache.

At last though, the bento was ready, and Sarada was out the door, holding her toast in her mouth. Luckily, she would not be late for lessons today.

She took them back out to look them over. She could imagine those papers laughing at her.

In the end, she couldn't figure out how her life had gone so wrong. All she knew was that she needed to get it back together.

Sarada had no trouble getting to the Academy campus with plenty of time to spare before classes started. More importantly, she was on time to find Boruto sitting against a tree, sulking. Something had gone wrong, Sarada could tell. And it must have been pretty bad.

"Uh, hey, Boruto," she said nervously. "Did something happen?"

"No," Boruto snapped. "I just feel like sittin' here!"

"You're crying," Sarada answered.

"Nuh-uh!"

"Yes-huh. Quit cryin' like that, you're embarrassin' me!"

"Hey, SHUT UP!" Boruto shouted while standing up to confront his teammate.

"Well there's the Boruto I remember," Sarada flatly remarked.

"Something's going on at home, isn't it?"

"No!" Boruto pretended to scoff, like he was hiding something.

"You liar," Sarada scoffed. "If you're going to cry, then just admit it!"

"I'm not-I'm not-AAAAHHHH!" Whatever dam that Boruto was trying to hold burst, and the crying came like a wave. It was loud and inelegant, and caught other students' attentions as they walked past them. Sarada didn't react so much. She wasn't embarrassed *for* him, but maybe a little embarrassed *by* him, although it was strangely satisfying to see him knocked down a couple of pegs for all his annoying boasting. Her mom told her that his father was like that when they were their age, too, although the Hokage's boasting came from a massive inferiority complex and need to be recognized. And then it suddenly occurred to her that Boruto might be dealing with something similar. If his constant insults of his own father were anything to go by.

"Something happened with your dad, right?" she asked.

"My dad-*SNIFF*-my dad yelled at me," he answered in between sniffles.

"Wait-what!?" she stammered. "What happened!?"

Boruto told her about what happened after they dispersed from Sensei Kohonamaru's lessons, and the new *jutsu* he wanted to try out. He'd walked in on his father going to bed, and then Naruto yelled at him.

Listening intently, Sarada actually felt pretty bad for the kid. From what it sounded like, the Hokage had really blown his top. "Wow, um, I'm really sorry," she said softly.

"Stupid old man," Boruto sniffled. "I don't wanna be Hokage, anyway!"

"I know, you've only said it like a million times," Sarada quipped. "Lucky for you. I caught my mom getting drunk last night."

"Really!?" Boruto scoffed. "What's wrong with her?"

"Nothing's wrong with her, you're just a spoiled brat!" Sarada shouted, getting defensive.

"SHUT UP!"

"MAKE ME!"

"Both of you need to shut up."

They'd been so engrossed in their argument that they didn't catch Mitsuki sneaking up on them. Both jumped, but recovered quickly enough to get angry with him.

"DON'T DO THAT, MITSUKI!" Boruto shouted, his eyes turning white.

"What were you arguing about?" Mitsuki asked.

"The village of Nunya," said Boruto.

"Nunya?"

"None o' your business!"

"Don't listen to him, he's stupid," said Sarada. "His dad yelled at him."

"Too bad," said Mitsuki.

"Well, he was pretty hurt by it," said Sarada. "Maybe you could go a little easier on him?"

"Oh," Mitsuki said, followed by hugging Boruto. "Sorry."

"Thanks," said Boruto.

"We should be going," said Sarada. "Sensei Konohamaru's probably getting impatient."

Naruto hated paperwork. But paperwork was 99% of the Hokage job, and no matter how much he could suck it up, he had to do it.

The papers strewn about his desk seemed to laugh at him, like they'd been doing for over a decade now. It was getting quite irritating. Actually more than irritating, it was downright harassment at this point. He couldn't really ask Shikamaru for a lot of help either, since his assistant was off on a little errand in the village.

Bills about counterfeiting, punishing Missing-Nin, usual personnel movements, new regulations, blah, blah, blah. It was all so monotonous, but he robotically filled it all out, not missing a single detail. The village government depended on an efficient bureaucracy embodying the Will of Fire, and he put that fiery passion to use, pouring his energy into the work. He could get more done using the Shadow Clones, which he'd already summoned to do some menial

tasks around the office. One had already ran past his office carrying cleaning supplies.

Then another packet of paperwork plopped on his desk, catching him off guard, but only for about a second. Looking up, he sighed and smiled.

"Kakashi-sensei!" he announced.

"How's it going?" Kakashi asked, nonchalantly raising his hand. "ANBU was going to deliver this to you, but I volunteered to deliver it."

"Thanks."

The Hokage flipped through the report. It mentioned something about some missing-nin hell-bent on attacking the village. But they had a window of opportunity to disrupt the plot. They also didn't need to send an elite squad. A genin squad should do the trick.

But Naruto wasn't going to take a chance. "I'm going to tell ANBU to strike on their own accord," he said. "I was thinking of Team Kohonamaru, but I have a better idea for them."

"Another training mission?" Kakashi asked.

"Maybe," said Naruto. "You know... I felt kind of guilty for thinking of them. Whatever, can you call them in?"

"Sure," said Kakashi. He turned to leave.

As Kakashi turned to leave, Naruto reached into his hokage robes and pulled the paper out. Momentarily hesitating, Naruto wondered if it was a good idea to mention it to Kakashi-sensei. He learned a lot from Kakashi, even if he could be rather cynical at times. But he remembered the bell test, leading him, Sakura and Sasuke on their first mission, the reunion... so many memories that he felt an unwanted nostalgic pang, yearning to relieve his youth, and a single

tear ran down his cheek. He knew he could trust Kakashi-sensei. He was one of his most important teachers and confidants.

"Actually, there's something else I wanted to talk to you about," he said. "I had a dream last night."

"So did I," said Kakashi. "But you don't see me talking about it."

"That's not it," Naruto replied. "Just... listen to me, please."

So he told Kakashi about the dream, reading off the paper. By the end, Kakashi looked like he was deep in thought, and Naruto wished he had a mind-reading jutsu.

"You're not going to like what I say," he said. "But you're not happy with your marriage."

"Wait, what?" Naruto sputtered. "Of course I'm happy!"

"Can you prove it? Why do you love Hinata?"

"She played with me when we were kids?"

"That was nice of her," Kakashi admitted. "But how long did that last?"

Naruto hesitated. "I don't know. I forgot about her after a while. Where are you going with this?"

"Not very far," said Kakashi. "You should probably figure this out for yourself."

"You're no help, Kakashi-sensei."

"I'm not supposed to get your life in order for you," Kakashi replied. "That's your job." He turned and departed. "If you need any more help on things besides your messed-up home life, I'm always on call."

Naruto wasn't angry nor infuriated, but he was certainly frustrated that his mentor wouldn't do much to help him.

But he didn't have much time to dwell on it. Konohamaru walked into his office shortly after Kakashi, and the rest of his team followed suit. Boruto kept his eyes averted, and Naruto felt that pang of guilt again. But he had other things to worry about right now.

"Good morning all," he said. "How are things going, Konohamaru?"

"They're going great," Konohamaru answered. "I've been teaching them some new jutsus."

"Good to hear," Naruto replied. "I called you in because I have a job for your team. We just need you to help a farmer outside the village cleaning up his barn. They already have someone cleaning out the... other stuff... so you won't have to worry about that. It should take you a couple of days, but we're not going to have you stay with him, since his house is already full. But they told us that you'll be working from the monkey hour and be let out around the Hour of the Monkey or Rooster."

The team was already groaning from having to do such menial labor, but they were relieved to hear the time.

"Then we should be on our way," said Konohamaru.

"No big missions!?" Sarada spat.

"We don't have anything you're thinking about," said Naruto.

"Besides, you can put your jutsus to good use."

"That's a good way of putting it," said Konohamaru.

"Here's the farm's location," Naruto said while handing Konohamaru a paper. "I'll see you guys later tonight."

Konohamaru and his team turned to leave. But Naruto wasn't done. "Boruto," he said. The boy froze fearfully. "When you get back, I'll

take you to Ichiraku's for dinner. I... shouldn't have yelled at you. It was wrong, and I'm sorry."

Boruto didn't say anything, but he walked away. That left Sarada behind to talk to him.

"Yes, Sarada?"

"My mom needs help," she said. "I think we're going to lose our house."

Naruto dropped his pen.

So how was this?

As much as I want this to be short and sweet, I recognize that there's a lot that I want to do, and it might take me a while to finish the story. That being said, I think I'm on a good roll here. I also want to thank everyone for the reviews, except for the one asshole who told me to kill myself. I hope you're proud of yourself. And I'm glad I'm getting such a good reception!

One last thing: There won't be any cheating going on in this story. I don't do cheating, even though I absolutely hate the ending pairings.

Thanks for reading!

Chapter 3

Naruto waited for Team Konohamaru to leave to summon another Shadow Clone and ditch his office. He felt a sudden surge of urgency he couldn't explain, but he felt that if Sakura Uchiha needed help, he had to hurry up. Why he suddenly cared so much to ditch work was beyond him at the moment, and would come back to him later on, but right now that wasn't going to come to him. The only thing that mattered was, *I have to help Sakura!*

The village residents didn't look up and notice him leaping across the rooftops. He probably would've looked like just another wannabe-ninja testing his skills out. Or a cop making his rounds. Naruto in turn didn't look downwards at the crowds below him with his mind so focused on Sakura Uchiha.

But if he did look down as he neared the bank, he would've seen Mrs. Uchiha leaving the bank with her bills in one hand and her hair in another. Just getting out of a meeting with the bank rep, she walked-no, she staggered-out of the bank building. More importantly, she held a few papers in her hand, and her head in her other one. No one out on the street knew it, but she'd just received some incredibly devastating news from her bank rep. And she wanted to throw up at least.

The man's words kept repeating in her mind. "*I'm sorry, but your payments have been chronically late and you don't have enough money to pay. And your credit won't allow us to give you another mortgage. I'm so sorry.*"

Having thought there was a solution to her struggles, the bank rep's revelation struck her like a tiger's paw. It was such a shock, she felt herself zoning in and out as the bank rep went over her financial issues. At one point, it felt like she was watching the whole thing from above her body. She felt like she was living in a waking

nightmare. She still felt that way walking out of the lobby and back out onto the street.

How was she going to get the money to pay off the bills? Getting a job was already on her mind. She could get a loan, but who would lend money to someone who was already swimming in debt and was also an Uchiha? Alright, the latter was her stressed-out mind going into overdrive. But where was Sasuke when she needed him?

The people passing her by either ignored or didn't notice how close she was to losing it in the middle of the street. She wanted to just drop down and cry right then and there, but she kept a straight, strong face as best she could. But she also wondered how she could explain this to Sarada. It would doubtlessly devastate her. She was already paying a hefty cost for Sarada to attend the Academy. Now she worried that Sarada might not be able to finish her ninja training. That thought brought her light-headedness back.

Trying to think of ways to end the foreclosure made her feel worse. She stumbled, forcing herself to brace herself against a stall. She took a moment to recover her bearings and-people were staring at

her. And not just staring at her, but throwing disapproving stares. And not just disapproving, but judgmental. She immediately felt defensive, letting her old ninja instincts take over, like some enemies had cornered her and she was preparing to fight back. She even squeezed the pole she held hard enough to crack the wood. It made the passers-by nervously walk away, but it also drew someone else's attention.

"Oi, oi! What are you doing!? Let go of that!" the clerk shouted at her.

Her head whipped in his direction and she promptly let go. She quickly apologized, bowing multiple times at the same time. The clerk accepted her apology, as his expression changed from angry to forgiving. But when Sakura raised her head back up, she realized why everyone was staring at her.

She'd stopped at a sake stand, and she looked drunk in her stunned state of mind to onlookers. Embarrassment washed over her again and she hurried away from the stand. The bartender watched her suspiciously, but shrugged.

She ran for several moments until she'd put enough distance between her and the sake stand. She sighed and caught her breath. She was still in good enough physical health to not have to do too much. But though she enjoyed the occasional sake with friends... on rare occasions they were willing to talk to her... alcohol was becoming too big a temptation and she needed to get away from it *right now* .

She'd already stopped running, so she walked quickly away from the stall, but not so fast as to bump into others or draw unnecessary attention to herself. She drew up a plan. It would look like she was in town for some shipping and just that, just like everyone else here. It was the perfect way to blend in.

"HEY! HEY! WANT TO BUY SOME WEAPONS!?" a vendor shouted. Sakura turned, and recognized the shopkeeper, Tenten from their academy days. Tenten harangued the passers-by. Her wares behind and around her looked like they were in mint condition, but there might have been a surplus just inside the stall itself. She felt bad for Tenten each time a customer walked past her, because she looked genuinely disappointed each time. She was tempted to buy a weapon, but she remembered that her finances were already a mess. This would just make it worse. "Oh come on! YOU! Please, help me out!"

Was she talking to her? She might've, and that's why she turned to look at Tenten. Her former classmate immediately recognized her.

"Sakura! Over here!" she called.

Ignoring the awkward stares, Sakura nervously smiled and waved back to her old classmate. But she was still nervous enough to keep walking, obviously to Tenten's disappointment. Shame boiled over

inside her stomach, making her wonder what was so wrong with her that should do such a thing. Why was she suddenly ashamed?

"You know it's rude to ignore a friend," said another voice.

Ino Yamanaka stood outside her flower shop, arms crossed, leaning against the door and with a sly, disapproving look on her face.

As much as Sakura wanted to avoid Ino, she knew she couldn't avoid her oldest friend. So she walked up to her and hugged her.

Naruto was breathing pretty heavily once he reached Sakura's house on the edge of the village, near the wall. The already-warm day combined with his sudden, urgent physical exertion meant he was soaked with sweat when he arrived at the house. Still catching his breath, he walked right up to the door and knocked. No answer. He knocked again, still no answer.

He looked around, trying to find a window to look inside. He found one and looked inside, but he didn't see anything except for furniture. That was odd. But he momentarily panicked, thinking that someone had already forced her to move out.

Then he realized that he got there when she wasn't home and he sighed. That was a waste of time. He also felt rather silly for ditching work-oh, *crap!*

He thought about Shikamaru coming into his office and figuring out that yet another shadow clone had taken the Hokage's place. His old friend was already unhappy with how he ditched work so often. An old woman shuffled past him on the path nearby the house. The Hokage was fixed into the woman's movements, and he was momentarily distracted by her pace. She was moving slower than a snail, her feet barely even leaving the ground or moving apart. Then he remembered that he still needed to get back to work, so he took off back towards the Academy. He would get back there with Shikamaru none the wiser.

He also didn't know that the old woman was eventually going to run into his wife.

Sakura eyed the tea cup like she was worried that it was poisoned. Ino chuckled at her, only making her more embarrassed.

The room they sat in behind the desk of Ino's flower shop was filled with flowers, paperwork, boxes and all sorts of junk. Sakura expected this, but the extent of the mess was what surprised her. But her surprise was a more amused surprise that made Ino laugh instead of offending her. "Sorry, we've been busy," she laughed.

"I noticed," Sakura replied.

Ino put her own tea cup down on the table, put her elbows there and leaned towards Sakura. "So why haven't you called me lately?" she asked. "I've wanted to have a ladies' night out with Hinata and Tenten."

"Well, I've been kind of busy," said Sakura.

"With what?" Ino asked. "You got fired from the hospital and you haven't even-"

"Shut up, Ino-pig," Sakura snapped.

"Sorry," said Ino. "I forgot it's still a touchy subject."

"I'm sorry, too," said Sakura. "I shouldn't have snapped like that."

"So how's Sarada?" Ino asked to change the subject.

"She's doing well," Sakura replied. "She's getting ambitious. She really wants to be Hokage."

"Like Naruto," Ino said, making it sound like a passing comment, but Sakura didn't see the sly expression in Ino's eyes.

"Yeah," Sakura replied, her expression softening. "How's Inojin?"

"He just returned from a mission in Sunagakure," Ino answered. Her mood soured. "I heard someone attacked them on the way back. I'm just glad they escaped."

"Oh, I'm... I'm so sorry," Sakura could only offer a minor condolence, and she felt worse for it.

"It reminded me of when we were kids," said Ino. "I keep forgetting how messed up we are. And although there's peace, it feels like nothing's changed."

Sakura didn't answer again, but that was because she couldn't. "Sakura, are you alright?"

"No," Sakura answered. "I'm miserable. I'm going to lose my house and there's nothing I can do."

"Sakura, I know exactly why you're miserable," said Ino. "What do you see in Sasuke?"

Sakura angrily scoffed. She was obviously quite visibly offended. But Ino was not going to back down.

"I'm financially sinking and you're worried about my marriage?!" Sakura snapped back.

Ino had to concede the point. But she wasn't giving up just yet. "*What* marriage!?" she snapped. "It's a worse joke than whatever Inu tried back in the day!"

"Wait, how do you know Inu told jokes?"

"I forgot which of us was the jokester," Ino replied.

"You're not making any good arguments, Pig," said Sakura, her hand on her palm.

"Whatever," Ino sighed. "Honestly, what do you see in Sasuke?"

"I still don't get it," said Sakura. "What did *you* see in Sasuke?"

"I saw a hot, cool guy, and that's it," said Ino. "Then I grew up." She sipped her tea.

Sakura's eyes narrowed. "You're being a bad host," she said.

"You're right," said Ino, "I'm sorry. What financial trouble are you in?" Sakura told her about her issues in making money, not just the potential of losing her house, the dwindling Uchiha fortune (which senior clan leaders had hidden from the Village in the case of emergency right before the Slaughter, and only unlocked after the 4th Shinobi World War by Sasuke) and her sudden and severe pay and hours cut at the hospital, the last of which caught Ino off guard.

Ino released a long, quiet sigh that lasted for several seconds. She looked around the back room. There was so much work to do on it. She knew her husband and son could take care of most of the heavy-lifting, but she might need some extra help on the paperwork; filling it out and filing it and all the rest. And Sakura was right there with her. Why not?

"I'm going to need some help with the store," she said. "I can't run this place all by myself."

Sakura's eyes lit up. "Are you-"

"You won't start today," Ino clarified.

"Ino, please, you don't have to do this," said Sakura.

"I know I don't, but I want to."

"Sakuraaaa!"

"You're being so nice to me, and I really appreciate it," said Sakura. "But, I can't just impose on you."

"Well, who are you waiting for? Sasuke?" Ino paused, like she was waiting for an answer. "I've got a lot of paperwork that needs filling and filing. And I could also use more help in the front. You're not going to fix your money problems waiting for a certain someone. I still don't know what-sorry. Sorry. Listen, if you don't want to start right now, that's fine. I just think you need a job. Right now. Just remember that the offer still stands."

Sakura smiled at Ino's sincerity, and shook her hand when Ino extended her own.

Team Konohamaru left the village promptly after meeting the Hokage, or more specifically, just a little bit after an early lunch so as not to lose any energy on the trail. Konohamaru led his team through the gates, singing a song from the other side of the world, but in a way that embarrassed his entire team. At least it cheered Boruto up, in kind a strange way, although he wasn't exactly cheered up, but temporarily distracted from thinking about his dad angrily yelling at him.

They exited the village gates a third through the horse hour. Then they made a quick eastward turn and, once far enough from the gates, took to the trees for a quicker trip to the farm, keeping a quick but steady pace. Konohamaru led the way of course, Sarada right behind him, Mitsuki second and Boruto in last. He lagged behind the rest of the team, but kept their pace, so he didn't fall all the way back.

But as they passed, some of the tree trunks partially dissolved, revealing hostile-looking men wearing forehead protectors with the insignias crossed out. The men all looked at each other, nodded, and then re-activated their chameleon jutsus to follow the team.

As for the team, they could tell they were getting closer as the minutes passed just by how strong the smell was getting. Everyone but Konohamaru became concerned, but Sarada especially. "That smell's not a good sign," she said as if thinking aloud.

"Don't jinx us!" Boruto shouted.

They soon finally reached the farm and to their relief, the smell wasn't so bad, it may have just been the wind.

The farmer, a kind of bulky man somewhere in his mid-30s and bronzed skin, walked up with his wife, who was also in her mid-30s, but had paler skin. So pale, in fact, that it took them a moment to realize that she was not from the Land of Fire nor any country around them. They all stared at her like she was from outer space, until she was visibly uncomfortable.

"Are we late?" Konohamaru asked.

"No, you're just in time," the farmer answered. "My name's Ryu. This is my wife, Freyja. I notice that you have guessed that she is not from around here."

"Sweetheart, please," she said, gently placing her hand on his shoulder. "I really do not wish to bring much attention to myself." Her accent was thick.

"Sorry, dear," he said. "Well, I'm glad y'all made it. Come with me, and let's get started. We'll save the rest of the introductions for later."

He led them into the farm as the defector ninjas caught up to the team.

Naruto returned to his office with enough time to spare before he calculated Shikamaru would. He waited for the shadow clone to finish what he was working on before dismissing the shadow clone and sitting back down at his desk. But it was when he sat down that he remembered that he just needed to call Sakura, and not go through all that trouble that he'd already gone through. He felt a little silly, but it was an easily remedied situation. So he picked the phone up and called Sakura's house, but got her answering machine. He left his message and hung up when Shikamaru returned.

"I did what you asked me to," he said, carrying an envelope in his hand and plopping it on the Hokage's desk. "More paperwork to file!"

"Perfect," Naruto answered, picking the envelope up, opening it and looking over the forms. He scoffed.

"Also, I heard Sasuke's returning soon."

Naruto paused and looked up at him. "When?"

"In about a month," Shikamaru answered. Naruto scoffed again and put the paperwork back.

He was about to get back to work, but he could hear Shikamaru sniffing loudly. He paused again, and in an effort to cover up his tracks, glanced up at his advisor making those noises. "What are you doing?" he asked. "I hope you're not getting sick."

"Do you smell something?" Shikamaru asked. "Were you sweating?"

Naruto sniffed his jacket. "Well, it's kind of hot in here."

"The air conditioning's on, sir," said Shikamaru. Then he scoffed and sighed. "Did you ditch the office *again* !?"

"No, I didn't, I swear!" Naruto stammered.

"What was the last piece of paperwork you had to do?"

"I had to, um, um..."

"Are you kidding me!?" Shikamaru gasped. "What did Boruto do this time!?"

"He... didn't do anything, I sent his team on a mission to clean out a farm."

"Oh," Shikamaru said, visibly a little disappointed.

"Why are you unhappy?" Naruto asked.

"No reason," said Shikamaru. "Did you see Kakashi-sensei?"

"He was in here earlier," Naruto replied without looking up from his paperwork. He neglected to tell him about what he and Kakashi discussed. And then he remembered what Kakashi asked about his wife.

"Lord Hokage?" Shikamaru brought him back to reality.

"Sorry."

"Do you want me to tell Hinata about your slacking off?"

"I think she knows I work hard," said Naruto.

"That's not an answer."

"But it's true. I have to be a great leader, so gotta work hard! That's how I got here!"

Shikamaru held his hands out. "Okay, okay! Calm down!"

But Naruto wasn't entirely satisfied. But he was also upset with himself for yelling at Shikamaru. "Sorry," he said quietly. "I just have a lot of work to do, and I need a break. I go right to bed when I get home every day. And my kids are reacting like-" He groaned and placed his face in his hands. " *That's* why Boruto hates me."

Shikamaru didn't have a response. So he didn't say anything. "Should I just... leave you alone, Lord Hokage?"

Naruto sighed. "Whatever you want to do," said Naruto. "I'm pathetic." Then an epiphany. "I'm miserable. How did my life end up like this?"

"I dunno," Shikamaru answered.

Naruto clearly did not like Shikamaru's answer.

On the other side of the village, Sakura finally returned home feeling a little better, but still very unhappy and stressed. She'd been considering Ino's job offer over and over again, but had yet to make a decision, which she understood might come back to bite her in the future. But her desire to return to the hospital spoke to her in the back of her mind, partially telling her that if she took Ino's offer, she might not get another chance to go back to the hospital. The other side of that equation was reminding her that she needed a job *right now* .

She noticed her landline had some messages for her. Temptation to ignore them crossed her mind, but she knew that it was necessary to listen to them. But she regretted it when she pressed 'play', because the messages were all from her creditors warning her to pay up or lose her house. Like she needed reminding. And while she listened to the messages, as if on a similar wavelength as Naruto, she said to herself, "How did my life end up like this?"

It finally got to the last message, and she feared it was another horrible message. But to her relief, the voice that spoke to her was not only familiar, but a welcome relief.

" Hello, Sakura, it's Naruto. Sarada told me about your situation. I don't know what I can do, but if there's any way I can help, I'll do what I can. I really don't want to see you suffer like this. Just remember that you're still my best friend. Believe it! Call me back as soon as you can. "

Sakura cried again, but this time it was tears of happiness.

Ok, so I'm sorry it took me so long to finish this chapter, but here it is.

I wanted to go over a few things in my notes. I want to thank everyone for all the reviews, except for one or two, those being

"DaFicFixer" and "Leonard942". The former for calling my fic "more shitfics from NaruSaku fanboys who can't accept they didn't get what they want", and the latter for giving me a painful review with almost no punctuation, making a bunch of points like "Divorce doesn't exist" in the Naruto 'verse or Naruto and Sasuke are dead in canon. Basically for misunderstanding the whole point of fanfiction.

Guess what? I don't give a fuck. It's my fucking fic, I'll write what I want. So there!

Second, I know some of you are probably confused about the way they tell time in this fic, with the animals. Those of you who do know can skip this coming part.

But since Naruto exists in an anachronistic world with heavy medieval Japanese influences, to me it only made sense that I use the clock medieval Japan used based on the Chinese zodiac. In this case, the hour of the horse would be 11 AM-1PM, or the lunch hours.

Third, I know Sakura getting fired from the hospital probably isn't canon, but I'm not too concerned about that. It's harsh, I know, and I feel bad for it. I hope you'll forgive me!

EDIT: I changed my mind about Sakura losing her job, so I did the next worst thing. She's still employed, just relegated to part-time.

I hope you enjoyed the chapter!

Chapter 4

Naruto got back home that evening at the exact same time and feeling the exact same way; at a quarter past the rooster hour, and completely exhausted. The house was still dim when he returned, only lit by the evening sun. He took his shoes off, then walked in and turned the lights on. He surmised that Hinata wasn't in just yet, just by how quiet it was. Knowing how quiet a person she'd always been, he also thought that she was still home, but not downstairs, or sitting off by herself to knit. Again with the knitting! He put his hand on his head and rubbed his right temple. He didn't want her little interests to annoy him, but it was like knitting was all she did nowadays. Why?

"Hinata?" he called.

No answer.

He didn't assume for a second that she wasn't home yet, just that she probably didn't hear him. He removed his Hokage cloak, placed it on the coat rack at the entrance and stepped further inside. He went straight for the fridge first and looked around for something besides the ramen cups.

Then he remembered that he wanted to go to Ichiraku's with Boruto, and he smacked his forehead. But Boruto was not back yet, which of course meant that he needed to wait for his son to get back. Until that happened, he had nothing to do besides sit down and watch TV or read for a few minutes.

But the show that he turned on was a dramatization of Jiraiya-sensei's book *The Legend of the Gutsy Ninja*, much to his chagrin. Ever since that movie came out, he felt something close to deep shame whenever he watched it for some reason, which he couldn't explain. In fact, every time he did, he'd imagine Jiraiya and others glaring at him, just like whenever he closed his eyes most of the time. The same thing happened here, in the climactic scene where

the Gutsy Ninja declares that he will bring peace to the Ninja World. Naruto *had* brought peace, but Gutsy's speech caused tears to well up in his eyes. Unable to take it anymore, he flipped the channel.

And now he felt worse. He didn't know why, but he tried to think of some possibilities for his reaction, the most obvious in his mind being second-hand embarrassment. The show was laughably bad, with bad writing, bad special effects and bad acting. It amazed him how someone could use bad graphics for a fire jutsu when they could just hire someone who could use an actual fire jutsu. And even worse, he could still see the wires they used to simulate flight or jumping techniques. Again, why couldn't they hire someone who was actually competent at this nonsense?

But he knew that this wasn't the real reason the show irked him, as valid as his reasons for disliking the production values were. No, the show's presentation felt like a reminder of something he'd done wrong that he couldn't think of off the top of his head. Or more specifically, didn't want to admit.

He closed his eyes to get away from it. But a quick image of Jiraiya and Kushina's scowling faces forced him to re-open them.

"Not agaaain," he groaned.

He was never going to sleep again if this kept up.

Naruto stood up and left the TV room, and was in for a surprise to see Boruto walking in.

The kid was not depressed anymore. In fact, he was unhappy. His hair was already dropping and Naruto could smell the boy's sweat. "Evening, Boruto!" he said cheerfully. "Did you get a lot done? Judging by your smell, I'd say you did!"

Boruto didn't answer. Instead, he looked away from Naruto. Immediately, guilt racked the Hokage's person again, and he felt that he needed to do something right now. So he knelt down and hugged

the boy. Boruto tried to escape, but Naruto's grip was too strong. And Naruto could tell Boruto was feeling uneasy.

"I'm really, really sorry I yelled at you," he said. "I've been feeling so terrible about it all day. It was nasty of me to do it. You're my *son*, Boruto, I didn't want to hurt you. And I'm sorry.

"I haven't been a great father, I know. But I'm going to try and get better."

Boruto could hardly believe his ears, but his father's words struck his very core, and he couldn't hold the tears back anymore. He hugged his father back and cried until he nearly ran out of tears.

"Come on. Take a shower and I'll take you to Ichiraku's. My treat," he said.

Naruto couldn't wait to start the ramen and went right at it the moment it was placed in front of him. Although Boruto still looked sad, even after cleaning up, he too went in, slurping up the broth and noodles.

The Hokage himself finished up a good gulp of noddles and sighed. "This place is the best!" he sighed again.

"Yeah," Boruto replied. He'd picked at the egg in his ramen to the point that he'd almost turned the broth yellow like scrambled egg soup. That seemed to be fine to Boruto though, as he seemed more interested in eating it this way.

"You know, my old sensei, Iruka, used to take me here a lot when I was your age," Naruto said to break the silence. "I remember one time, after I made a mess of Hokage Rock, he made me clean up the mess, and then took me here." He looked down at Boruto, but saw the boy still wasn't interested. "I used to be a great nuisance to everyone, kind of like you are now. But as an old master said, when harmony prevails, there will be no scarcity of people; and when there

is such a contented repose, there will be no rebellious upsettings. So I had to learn not to upset the balance of the village."

Still nothing. "That's a terrible excuse for being a bad dad," Boruto finally declared.

"Boruto, I'm sorry, I really am," said Naruto. "But Ive been way too busy to-"

"You keep saying that!" Boruto interrupted. "Why can't you be a better dad for me!?"

"I have to be like a father to the rest of the village," Naruto tried to calmly explain. "It's my duty!"

"You should still have time for me!" Boruto declared. "And what that old master said doesn't make sense."

"Yeah, I didn't really get it much, either," said Naruto. "Thing is, everyone hated me when I was a kid. And I was alone. And I hated the world because they hated who I was. Then Iruka-sensei helped me out, and-"

"Iruka-sensei?" Boruto interrupted again. "But you always said mom was the first person to be nice to you!"

Naruto stopped and stammered. "I, I, um-yes, well, you're right, but-"

"It was just one time?"

"Um, maybe," he said. He thought back to the mission to rescue Hinata's sister, Hanabi, and the genjutsu he and Hinata fell into, that reawoke his memories of the times they played together. But as he kept thinking back to them, the wistful, nostalgia expression he held changed as he tried to remember why the memories slowed down and then stopped. Then he remembered the lonely years that followed, and Hinata was nowhere to be seen, just Iruka-sensei, then Sakura and Sasuke, Jiraiya, Gaara, Choji, Lee, Neji, and everyone

else he befriended. Hinata barely even showed up in those recollections before the Hanabi mission. There was the Pein fight, but it went disastrous for her. And then he realized-

"Dad?"

He nearly jumped out of his seat, but recovered. Boruto still looked at him, quite obviously visibly concerned and confused.

"Sorry, I lost myself there," he said.

"Dad, do you hate mom?" Boruto asked, looking very concerned.

"No, I don't hate her," he said. "It's just... Nothing, forget it."

"Then don't lecture me on anything!" Boruto spat.

Naruto sighed. He should have known that making amends with a son that heavily resented him wouldn't be solved over one single ramen bowl. And he correctly concluded that for all his talk about harmony, he did not have it in his own home. And fittingly, he thought of the old master's other words about harmony: *' First there must be order and harmony within your own mind. Then this order will spread to your family, then to the community, and finally to your entire kingdom. Only then can you have peace and harmony .'*

He wasn't likely to have that any time soon.

"So... how was the farm?" he asked to re-start the conversation with some small talk.

"Eh, it was ok," Boruto replied lethargically. "It smelled really, really bad."

Naruto chuckled. "I guess it did. Did you do anything?"

"Eh, I just helped feed some chickens with the farmer's wife," said Boruto. "She's not from around here. Her name's Freyja."

"Ah, she must be from Fjordland," Naruto said to himself. "Was Ryu nice to you?"

"Yeah, he was," Boruto answered.

"I knew he'd say that," Naruto said wistfully. "Did you meet his farm hands?"

"Yeah, I did."

"What did you think of them?"

"They were alright."

Naruto wasn't happy that his 12-year-old son was already answering like a teenager. But again, he knew full well that he deserved it. But it meant that he still had work to do to in getting Boruto back on his side. And he knew the best way to start was to be a better father.

"You know, aside from a few things, you remind me a lot of when I was your age," he said. "And I want to-"

"Stop saying you want to be a good dad and be one!" Boruto snapped. "I hear it all the time! When are ya gonna be one!?"

"Can I start now?"

"Well yeah, but-"

"I *know* I've been a lousy father! But you know, I'm just going to come out and say it; you've been a brat! So neither of us are perfect. Let's start by acknowledging each other's imperfections and go from there, ok?"

"You think I'm a brat?"

"I think you've taken your life for granted a bit," said Naruto. "I've heard Sarada thinks you're spoiled." Boruto crossed his arms and looked away. Naruto had to apologize to Teuchi for being so loud.

"Who cares about her?" Boruto asked without so much as a blush, but clear resentment.

"Well, her mother's had to raise her all by herself, no thanks to Sasuke," Naruto replied, suddenly aware that he just said that.

"Yeah, so what? You're a lot like him!"

Naruto didn't have an answer.

"I think you're losing," said Teuchi, making Naruto send a disapproving look his way. "Although to be fair, from what I hear, you're trying. Where's Sasuke been? The deadbeat. I never liked him, by the way. Always looked too full of himself and such. I also don't like how a lot of people still like him after all the stuff I heard he's done."

"Thanks, Teuchi," Naruto said. Teuchi shrugged and didn't say anything else.

And because there wasn't much else that *could* be said, there was nothing else that *was* said. They quietly ate the rest of their ramen, Naruto paid and then they finally left, first to walk the calories off, and second to just walk the streets, which Naruto hoped would help him bond with Boruto in some small way, even if he knew that it likely wasn't going to succeed. Better to try and fail than not try at all, though.

The village center was busy for a school night. Citizens hustled and bustled along the main thoroughfare, looking at the shops, stalls and carts hawking all kinds of items; clothing, jewelry, food, household items and appliances, and the shoppers' chatter, street musicians and radios provided the soundtrack. The streetlights, which had were as of yet unnecessary in the late-summer evening, began turning on one by one, but didn't completely light the thoroughfare yet because the sun was still above the high-rises and horizon in the distance.

Boruto was temporarily distracted until he saw some kids glaring at him, causing him to turn away. Naruto curiously looked in the direction Boruto had been looking, but saw the kids' parents also glaring at him. The bad memories of the eyes in his dreams and in his childhood caused him to close his eyes and look away. Boruto saw this, but didn't say anything. Although he did recognize part of the reason why his father was adverse to those glares. But he also didn't know what the reason for those glares were right now.

"Hey, Naruto!" A woman's voice called out. Naruto had been looking around to avoid any glares he saw, and his face instantly lit up when he saw Sakura Uchiha walking towards him.

"Sakura!" he said excitedly. "What are you doing here?"

"Shopping," she replied. "What about you?"

"I took Boruto out for dinner," Naruto answered.

"Hi, Mrs. Uchiha," Boruto sang.

"Good evening, Boruto," Sakura answered. Naruto chuckled and tussled his son's hair, and Boruto looked like he wanted to die right then and there to save himself further embarrassment. "So how has the Hokage been doing lately?"

"Paperwork, and lots of it," Naruto groaned. "And too much of it to be honest. And this guy here is helping a farmer out. But you probably knew that, since I'm sure Sarada told you, right?"

"Of course she did," Sakura answered.

"By the way, where is she right now?"

"She's sleeping over at a friend's house tonight."

"What about you, how's the hospital?"

"About that," said Sakura, turning serious. "I got your voicemail, Naruto."

"You did," Naruto confirmed. "What's going on?"

Sakura squirmed in place, looking around at the passers-by ignoring the two war heroes, the man and woman who saved the world. It actually wasn't either ironic or sad. Instead, it was a relief to an extent. But that was obviously not the focus. Sakura drew in a deep breath and sighed. "I got an hour and wage cut from the hospital," she said*. "I still don't know why. Sometimes I don't even come in for... a week's length, and only work a single day all week. I don't even work 4 or six hours of the day.

"So now I can't afford to pay my loans. And I was getting closer to paying them off."

"Oh, wow," Naruto whispered.

"I'd say I don't know what to do, but I talked to Ino earlier today. She offered me a job at her flower shop."

"That sounds great!" Naruto declared. "You should accept it! I'm sure you'd love it!"

"You really sure?" Sakura asked.

"Yeah, of course! Other than that, do you want me to give you a loa-"

"No, Naruto," she interrupted him. "I'm already in too much debt. I can't afford another loan."

"I won't have you pay it back, I just-"

"No, I can't get you in any trouble if you have to spend your money like that," she interrupted again.

"Well then, I know a foreclosure attorney who can help," said Naruto.

"That I can go with," she nodded. Naruto took out a pen and paper, wrote the name and number down and handed the paper to Sakura. "Thanks."

"Is it okay if I talk to your boss about it?" Naruto asked.

"Sure, but don't rasengan, or talk jutsu him to the point of boredom," she answered. "I still need to confront him myself."

"Of course," Naruto laughed. "I know you can do it." In that moment, a question that started in the deepest pits of his subconscious formed in his mind, knocking at him and threatening to burst out of his mouth like one of Might Gai's dynamic entries. But he fought against it, and struggled not to show it to Sakura. He did wonder how this woman, who was once a bratty 12-year-old, then matured into a confident young woman who could handle anyone or anything, with her masterful control of chakra and healing skills, end up like this? He used to have a crush on her, until he realized that he only loved her because of his rivalry with Sasuke. But did he?

*Why are you still holding out for Sasuke? What happened to you?
Where'd the strong Sakura go?*

But while he struggled not to say anything, Sakura struggled with the same problem herself. She could see that he normally radiant smile had not been as radiant as she remembered a long time ago, which drove a kunai through her emotions. He was the gutsy ninja, a boy with a dream that drew her interest, respect and admiration, despite being loudmouthed, brash and annoying as hell. But he became something more, and she began... to see him as a brother or best friend. A different word had formed in her thoughts, but she was relieved to not think it. But she too had to struggle to keep a different thought in her subconscious.

What happened to you, Naruto? You don't deserve Hinata. And where's the boy I used to know?

And although they did not share a psychic mental connection, they both wondered what had gone wrong with each other's' life. And at the same time, old feelings they struggled to deny for years bubbled up to the surface like a slow-erupting volcano.

Meanwhile, Boruto watched, confused as to why both of them were standing in the middle of the street, staring at each other with stupid smiles. So he cleared his throat to get his father's attention. Once Naruto turned to him, he pointed to his wrist as if to tell Naruto something.

"Sorry," he said. "I think we should get going. Are you tired, Boruto?"

"Yeah," the boy said. "Mom might be wondering where we are."

Naruto frowned again and turned to Sakura. "It was good to see you again," he said.

"You too," she replied, and stood still as Naruto walked past her and away with Boruto in tow.

And either despite their best efforts, or unknowingly, they felt a sharp tinge of regret in their very cores.

Naruto returned home a short time later later. He found Hinata sewing away at the dinner table again, lost in her own little world until she heard his footfalls and looked up. "Welcome back," she said. "Where did you go?"

"Ichiraku's," Naruto answered. "I'm trying to re-connect with Boruto."

"You don't have to," she said, without looking up from her sewing.

"No, I need to," he said. "I've been a bad father. And I want to get better."

"But you're already a good father," she said. "What else did you do?"

"We saw Sakura Uchiha," he said. "She's having some financial issues, so I tried to help." His serious expression changed, as he smiled. Hinata happened to look up at this and frowned.

"What's wrong? Do you hate me?"

Naruto gasped and sputtered. "Of course not!" he said. "I love you so much." He wanted it to sound cheerful, but it didn't sound that way. Undeterred, he walked over to Hinata. "You know, I was just remembering our wedding day. You looked so beautiful."

"Thank you," she said.

Then he kissed her passionately. Except he didn't feel the passion, even when he added tongue. In fact, she did most of the work, which he *wanted* to like, but... it was hard to put into words, and as has already been mentioned, he didn't think himself that good a writer to come up with a good descriptor for how he felt right now.

And worse, instead of her dark navy blue hair, he imagined pink hair.

He ended the kiss. "Wow!" he gasped. "That was amazing!" *Liar.*

"Is something wrong?"

"No, nothing's wrong!" he awkwardly laughed, backed off and went right upstairs to bed, all the while denying that screaming in the back of his mind telling him that he was lying to himself.

Hello everyone, sorry it took so long to update this.

*I didn't like the idea of Sakura getting fired, so I edited the previous chapter so as to make her a super-part time hospital employee My plans for this fic haven't changed, but I hope you'll like the edit I've made. I already like it better.

The old master that Naruto thinks about is actually Confucius, or whomever the Naruto world's equivalent was. Naruto the series is influenced a lot by Confucianism, which meant that I've needed to read up on him. He's fascinating, especially considering his effect on East Asian cultures.

I also want to thank everyone for their reviews! Except for DaFicfixer, because you obviously completely misunderstand what fanfiction is supposed to be about. That being said, I appreciate all the feedback and suggestions! I'll try to take them to heart as I go on!

Chapter 5

A week passed.

Things seemed to settle down at the Hogake's house, although Boruto kept giving Naruto the cold shoulder when he'd leave in the mornings. The first day afterwards, which was the second day Boruto would go to work on the farm, Naruto offered to walk his son to the gate after breakfast, but Boruto wasn't interested. He just barged through the doorway past his father, carrying his equipment in his bag to head for the gate.

Sakura accepted Ino's job offer, but the hospital was still a sticking point. When she told Sarada about the new job, her daughter wondered why, when she should be asking for more hours at the hospital. Sakura couldn't deny that her daughter had a good point, and didn't answer that question. And she didn't get the opportunity to answer, as Sarada had to hurry up to catch Boruto and Mitsuki as they passed by to head off on their third day of working at the farm.

But Sakura did have an idea, thanks to her what her daughter pointed out. She got her calendar out and examined the hospital shifts she did know she had, and decided which ones to schedule around. This would be a temporary job before she was able to get her hospital hours back, she told herself. At least, she hoped it would be temporary. At least she was entering retail to work for a friend who'd have her back when dealing with the more obnoxious customers. Still, she knew that the hospital was her priority.

She just hoped she could gather the courage to talk to her boss.

And that previous sentence left her bewildered.

Sarada joined up with the team in front of the village gate, where they waited for her and for the gate to open. As soon as she joined them, the gate indeed opened and they left the village.

And as soon as they left the village, Boruto started complaining again.

"Stupid old man! He thinks he can bribe me with ramen to get me to like him?! He can't buy me! And he says he's busy, why can't he just leave a shadow clone in the office, like he did before?!"

He kept going on and on, barely noticing that Sarada and Mitsuki were flat-out ignoring him, and Konohamaru-sensei wasn't interested in informing him of their silent derision.

"How long are we going to let him talk for?" Mitsuki asked.

"Until he figures out we're ignoring him," Sarada answered. "That'll be a while."

"I heard that!" Boruto called.

"Alright guys, that's enough," Konohamaru called out. "Let's put the personal stuff behind us for today, alright?"

" *Okaaaaayyyyyy*, " the rest of the team flatly and unenthusiastically answered, a reply that Konohamaru didn't like, making him sigh.

And, just as disappointing for him, the team didn't speak to each other the rest of the way to the farm, nor on the return trip. It was probably one of the more disappointing times for Konohamaru, although he'd had to deal with far worse in his short time on Earth.

And all week, a group of four men wearing forehead protectors with crossed out symbols stalked them from afar and up close. Two of the men wore Land of Sound headbands, one wore a Land of Waves forehead protector, and the last one wore a Konoha symbol. On one particular day, the man wearing the Waves forehead protector glanced over at the Konoha missing-nin, narrowed his eyes and stared at him for a short time before the Konoha man took notice.

"What is it, Shiro?" he asked the Waves missing-nin in a gruff voice.

"When are we going to attack?"

"When we're ready."

"We've *been* ready," said Shiro. "Our window of opportunity could close soon."

"Have you *seen* that farm? Yes, it is in good shape, but it will-"

"Will what!?" Shiro interrupted. "You cannot possibly-"

The quartet's leader was on Shiro in an instant, grabbing his collar and pushing him hard against the trunk. Although his expression was stoic, his eyes had enough disapproval in them to stop Shiro. "We are not rushing into anything. You will get a chance to kill the Hokage, but I still have first dibs on him. But we must be patient. Understand!?"

"Y-y-yes, sir!"

"Good." He let Shiro go and returned to his vantage point. Shiro didn't ask any more questions.

The rest of the week still passed by rather uneventfully, although Boruto began to notice something. He knew it started when he watched his father talking to Mrs. Uchiha, and it continued the week that he and his team went off to the farm. He suspected what it might be, but couldn't quite put his finger on it. He was used to his parents not speaking to each other much, or Naruto ignoring her, and maybe he choice have figured out that something was wrong much earlier. But although thinks looked the same, he felt something off about his mom and dad.

Getting back to this story, a week had finally passed since Boruto's team started working on the farm. Building on the last paragraph, things had appeared to at least settle down between Naruto, Boruto and Hinata to an extent, and things looked normal. But when Boruto awoke that day, his previous observations hit him hard.

It began when he sat down for breakfast, next to Himawari, as usual, their dad at the head of the table and their mom serving their breakfast.

" *Thanks, mom!* " Boruto and Himawari sang.

"Thank you, Hinata," Naruto said as well.

Boruto looked up and saw Naruto's subtly horrified expression, which quickly vanished. Boruto's shared horror didn't disappear until Naruto looked at him, at which he went straight to the oatmeal in front of him. But he'd heard his father's voice, and it didn't have any warmth-nor cold hostility-and sounded flat. He suspected his mom didn't notice it, and a glance over at her quietly enjoying her breakfast confirmed his suspicions. But just from his father's voice, he knew that something was not right. And he thought back to the meeting with Mrs. Uchiha, and his father's completely different demeanor with her. But something, specifically an uncharacteristic uncertainty, stopped him from bringing it up.

Naruto himself kept replaying his answer over and over again in his head, knowing that if she'd been paying attention, she could have confronted him over his tone. But, since she didn't notice, he was relieved. But he still wondered why he sounded that way. Feelings for people do certainly change over time. That's the way life is. Could it be that his feelings for Hinata had changed now that they'd been married for so long? It was the likeliest answer, but he felt a deep part of his subconscious laughing at him.

But, when he turned to look at Boruto, he noticed the boy shared his shocked expression.

Neither of them said a thing to each other, for fear of causing a lot more trouble than it was worth.

And neither of them had the foresight to see that it was the beginning of the end of Naruto and Hinata's marriage.

Sakura was scheduled to start her shift at the flower shop at the snake hour. She dressed for the occasion, as she always did, and was about to head out. Sarada, also dressed for a day at a farm, entered the house's... entrance as her mother was about to head out.

"I still don't get it," Sarada said. "Why not talk to your boss?"

"I did," Sakura replied. "He kept talking around." She sighed. "Great. Another problem. Well, for now, I need the money."

"Are you scared to talk to your boss?" Sarada asked. "I don't get it! You're so brave, but you shrank against dad and you're not standing up for yourself-"

"*Sarada* ." Sakura was about to say more, but dropped it as quickly as she almost started it. "I have a shift at the hospital tomorrow. I'll talk to him then."

"Now you're acting like my mom," Sakura laughed. "I wonder which of us-" her reaction to her own words may have been delayed, but it was hard-hitting like Sarada expected it to be. They did have a good relationship with grandma Mebuki, but plenty of awkward moments between mother and daughter would tell anyone that something wasn't right between Mebuki and Sakura.

"I have to go," said Sakura. She opened her arms for Sarada, and her daughter leaned into her mother's hug. "Have fun. Work hard. Whatever."

"Okay," Sarada said, sounding very much like the teenager she was on the verge of becoming.

"I'll be late getting back because I'm going to meet the foreclosure attorney," said Sakura.

"Okay," said Sarada.

"I love you," Sakura whispered to her daughter before departing.

She walked to Ino's flower shop, which was a several-minute journey, while carrying a bento box and a bag carrying her apron. Konoha's streets were just starting to fill for the day, which at this current time were mostly shop or government employees, or shoppers wanting to get an early start or finish on their errands. The current cloudless, warm, late-mid-summer weather encouraged the shoppers to come out to shop early. She even saw people from other lands, and a passing-by couple speaking harsh-sounding language was among them. She paused to listen. Were they from that Fjordland Sarada mentioned? She didn't get a chance to ask them because they were quickly out of reach, the crowd getting between them and her.

She shrugged. No biggie.

Ino was waiting for her when she arrived at the flower shop, although she was busy watering some irises outside the shop's building. But, she looked up and greeted Sakura as the latter walked into the still-closed shop. There, she went straight into the back, where the storeroom and "employee lounge", for lack of a better term, were and put her things away. She took an apron off one of the hangers and put it on before walking over to the clock, where she punched in. Then she stepped out from behind the counter and waited for Ino to change the open/closed sign.

Then her new boss flipped the sign from "CLOSED" to "OPEN".

The customer traffic began not long after. Ino filled out the orders and designing the arrangements the customers wanted, and Sakura did most of the handiwork involved. She arranged the arrangements the way the customers ordered, or by standard designs that Ino already sold. Since she already knew how to arrange these things, and was still technically in training, it came to her with practice. She also used some chakra to bring some more life to the arrangements. It wasn't part of the job, but the grin Ino wore told Sakura that she agreed it was a good idea.

But all in all, it was shaping up to be a good day.

Naruto didn't have as good a work day as Sakura was already having. The paperwork rapidly piled up on his desk, and he could only watch as more came to him. However, although he was having a bad day indeed in part because of the sudden influx of paperwork, the bigger reason was domestic.

His flat response to Hinata earlier in the day still haunted him. It played over and over again in his mind, like he was under a Tsukuyomi or just some endless loop from a movie he'd seen with his kids. It wasn't nearly as nightmarish as the movie, but it was concerning. He never went back on his word, and he intended to stay with Hinata for the rest of his life, or else he might be a terrible person.

Subconsciously, he thought that was a terrible reason.

Shikamaru walked into the office, carrying some more paperwork. Naruto sighed. "Just some forms," said Shikamaru.

"I already have a lot of forms," said Naruto. But he took the forms anyway, and was surprised when he saw one of the reports.

Missing-nin had been spotted in the forest near the farm Boruto and his team were working. He immediately felt concerned for his son, and rightfully so.

"Who spotted those missing-nin?" Naruto asked, as the report itself didn't mention who saw it.

"Some ANBU agents," said Shikamaru. "Should we keep an eye on them?"

"Absolutely!" Naruto spat back. "And take them into custody if they're caught. Actually, forget that. Get them now!"

"Yes, Lord Hokage!" Shikamaru declared as he wrote the note down on a small slip of paper. He turned to leave, but paused in his tracks when he noticed Naruto still leaning against the desk with his head in his hands. "Is there something wrong?" he asked.

"Can you keep a secret?" Naruto asked.

"Uh, yeah?"

"Do you think that I've been a bad hokage? Be honest?"

"I don't... think so," Shikamaru answered. "But I don't think that has anything to do with your... whatever it is."

"Funk?"

"Yeah, that."

"Is Boruto's temper getting to you?"

"I'm trying to make it up to him after yelling at him," said Naruto. He sighed. "How did things get so wrong?"

Shikamaru didn't answer on account of being so stunned at the Hokage's confession to speak. Instead he stared at him while the Hokage went back to the paperwork as if he didn't know what he just said. In fact it looked like he didn't know he'd just blurted something out. Or maybe he was just wondering how things with Boruto had gone wrong. Shikamaru had known Boruto for a long time, and he saw the Hokage and his son had a good relationship when they were younger. At some point, after Naruto became the Hokage, Boruto resented him more. He usually took Naruto's side on these things, since he knew how busy he could be. In any case, the Hokage needed help.

"I don't think you've been that bad a father," he said. "You're busy a lot, so it's not surprising you'd have little time for him."

"I wish that explanation worked," Naruto replied.

"Ah. I see," said Shikamaru. "This is gonna be hard," he said to himself.

"I hope he doesn't hate me," Naruto said to himself. But his voice sounded like he'd already resigned himself to the possibility. "But I think there's worse for me."

"How?"

Naruto took a deep breath, still uncomfortable talking about it, but he needed to get it off his chest. Then he told Shikamaru in as much detail as he could, right down to the shock he and his son shared.

Shikamaru had nothing.

This instantly irritated the Hokage. "You could say something!" he shouted.

"How am I supposed to clean up your issues at home!?" Shikamaru shouted back. "Go to a marriage counselor or something!"

Frustration swept over the Hokage, but Shikamaru's frustrated suggestion made some sense. But there was another problem that came to mind. "How am I going to tell Hinata?" he asked.

"Were you asking me?"

"No."

"Good, because I'm not going to fix *your* problems. I don't know where this came from. But it's really annoying."

"I've always annoyed you," said Naruto. "Remember that time we saved Kakashi when you didn't want to?"

"Barely."

"Forget it."

"I'm not going to be your personal helper," said Shikamaru. "Figure this out yourself!"

"Can you at least give me a suggestion for softening the blow I'm going to give her?"

"Buy her some flowers or something," said Shikamaru.

Naruto sighed, consigning himself to his fate. "Guess I should do it soon."

Sakura's day was going well, and this was before she remembered that she was scheduled to meet with the foreclosure attorney. Her day consisted of arranging arrangements for customers, watering the flowers, and filling out paperwork for orders when Ino wasn't available to do it. Although the work was neither strenuous nor exhausting, she stopped to take a breather and get some water every now and then. Still, she felt better, except for the times when a customer got rather stupid or rude, pushing her already-short patience. A couple deep breaths usually did the trick.

But now she was on her lunch break, or to be more precise, nearing the end of the lunch break. She ate from a bento box she'd made for herself that morning, that matched her daughter's bento box. It was easier for her to make two identical boxes, as she believed.

And of course, it was so good, that she was engrossed in it to such an extent that she didn't hear someone coming in until her old ninja instincts kicked in. She spun around in her chair and came face-to-face with Sai, Ino's husband (she was still surprised that they ended up together).

"Hello, Sakura," he said. "Sorry if I interrupted you."

"No problem," Sakura replied. "Just knock first."

"Okay," he said.

He walked over to Ino's main desk and placed some flowers there. Smiling, he turned back to Sakura. "Something for her."

"She'll love it," said Sakura. "I just wish Sasuke would send me something."

Sai's expression soured. He could see that while she tried to look happy, she was far from it. He wanted to be blunt about what he felt was her insistence on holding on to a childish crush, but Ino had long since told him not to. *She has to figure this out for herself*, she'd told him.

Still, that didn't mean there wasn't something he couldn't say. "I understand that taking part in *jonin* missions can earn a lot of money," he said.

"I'm not interested," she replied.

"Why not?"

"I'm a healer now," she said. "Besides, I'm useless. Everyone says it, even Sasuke."

He wanted to shake her. Hard. But he kept his composure. Figuring things out for herself was going to be hard if she was this blind.

"Have you been drinking again?" he suddenly asked.

"That was one-wait, *WHAT?!* "

"Saaaaaiiiii, deeeaaarrrr, could you come here, please?" Ino called. Sai did as asked and left the break room. After that, Sakura wasn't sure what happened, but she didn't see or hear Ino grabbing her husband's ear and quietly, but harshly, reprimanding him.

Sakura didn't know what happened even when she returned to the counter, where Ino and Sai were still sitting by, pleasant grins adorning their lips. Although it didn't unnerve Sakura, it made her feel very suspicious, and she raised an eyebrow. Noticing this, Ino

and Sai both looked away from Sakura. Sai even muttered something about a mission. It only drew Sakura's annoyance, but not Ino's. This whole thing was turning into a farce.

Nothing much else happened the rest of the day. Then, about halfway through the hour of the goat, the bell rang and most of the activity in the shop stopped. Sakura had been working on a bouquet of lilies. She turned around to greet the customer, and quietly gasped.

Naruto had tried to walk in incognito, but to his dismay, the other customers recognized him after he tripped the entrance bell. He cringed and sheepishly gestured to the other customers. The other customers went back to whatever they were doing, ignoring the Hokage. Or maybe doing what the Hokage asked, it was a little bit confusing at the moment.

Grinning, Sakura leaned against the counter to watch Naruto clumsily make his way around the store, trying to avoid the leers of the other customers. In fact, her smile momentarily disappeared when she saw a customer glaring at Naruto, or to be specific, the Hokage. At least that's what Sakura suspected. They must have been quite angry with him to be glaring at him in public.

Still, as she watched him, she couldn't stop her smile from coming back as he fumbled around the store. In a way, he was still the same goofball she lo-admired. Speaking of Naruto, where was Sasuke?

"Good afternoon, Lord Hokage," Ino said with a bow, causing Naruto to almost jump into stand of flowers. "What can I help you with today?"

"Oh, just a nice bouquet for Hinata," he said. His tone sounded different. Was something going on?

"The usual?" Ino asked. Sakura internally cursed herself for not knowing this. Ino had neglected to inform her of customers' preferences.

"Yes," he answered, "But I might need a little extra in it."

"Did something bad happen?" Ino asked.

"I don't want to talk about it," he said sheepishly.

"Fair enough," said Ino. "Sakura, please keep doing what you're doing. I'll handle the Hokage's order."

Sakura sighed in relief. "Okay," she said. She watched Ino walk over to some roses and lilies. "Did something happen?"

"Well, I, uh..." Naruto fumbled through his words. "Not really, I just thought it was a good idea to get Hinata flowers, 'ttebayo?"

"You don't look too sure of yourself," said Sakura.

Because he married the wrong woman, Ino thought to herself as she picked some irises. "Just remember to be polite with the customers, Sakura," she said aloud.

"Oh, right! Sorry!" Sakura bowed. "I'm meeting the foreclosure attorney later. By the way, is there anything else you would like?"

"Where did the card rack go?" he asked. Sakura pointed at an object near the counter. Naruto smacked his head. It was right in plain sight. Sakura laughed. "You seem happy to be here."

"I'm growing my skill set," she replied.

Ino kept listening, pleased that Sakura was acting like an actual employee, but got frustrated at how they were talking to each other, it would have to end soon, though. She finished making the bouquet, cleared her throat and brought it to the counter. Naruto heard her clear her throat, and followed her back to the counter where he paid for his flowers and left. Like a proper employee, Sakura and Ino bowed as he departed.

Sai, who had been in the back, stepped out to the front and whispered in Ino's ear, "Stop trying to rush things!"

"I'm not doing anything!" she whispered back. "I'm just waiting for them to figure it out themselves! If only they weren't so stupid!"

"Did you say something, Ino?" Sakura asked.

"No," Ino replied. "But you're doing well! Keep up the good work!"

Sakura smiled and returned to her work.

Naruto returned home on time to catch Hinata making dinner. After trying to keep the flowers watered all day, it was a relief to finally take them out to show her. He was positive these flowers, irises and such, were the right ones for her. If not, he was concerned. He couldn't imagine returning them right now, after he'd gone through the script he'd made in his head to tell her that he wanted to go to couples therapy. Marriage counseling. He forgot what it was called for about a second.

He could hear her talking to Himawari, probably about the dinner they were making tonight. They wouldn't notice him coming in at first, and they didn't when he walked into the kitchen. Himawari was standing on a small stool next to Hinata, and they ignored him. But his shadow, and the action of clearing his throat, caught their attention.

"Daddy!" Himawari shouted, jumping off the stool, running up to him and hugging his leg. He gave her a weak smile, and another one to Hinata.

"Welcome home," she said. "Are you still tired?"

"Well, uh, not really," he said. He whipped the flowers out and gave her a forced smile. She didn't notice the forced smile at first, just the

flowers. Although he was happy that she liked them, and dreaded what he was going to say. "Is something wrong?" she asked.

"Not really," he answered, scratching the back of his head. "But, I, um..." He tried to think of what to say, but kept coming up blank over and over again.

The Great Naruto Uzumaki, who always spoke his mind, was at a loss for words and didn't know how to tell his wife that he was getting marriage counseling.

"I can't do this anymore," he groaned. "We're getting marriage counselling!"

Hinata's jaw dropped and so did the flowers.

Okay, first I want to apologize for taking so long to finish this bitch. Because writer's block IS a bitch. My schedule is also a bitch.

Right after finishing chapter 4, I kinda got a little lost and tripped up writing this. There's several reasons for that, the main one being good old fashioned writer's block, and doubting my story. Also, as I've mentioned, my schedule's been very hectic for the past few weeks. It's meant that I'm pretty tired when I try to sit down and write. I fear it may have been bad for my prose, too.

In terms of the story, I received some comments about Sakura's employment situation. One of them was about why she didn't take any Jonin missions. So I decided to address it in the text. And I'll continue to address it in the text.

Also, I still don't understand why someone would try to suicide bait me just because I'm writing a fic for a pairing they don't like. *Sighs*

Again, I'm sorry for taking so long to finish this chapter. I'll try to get the next one up ASAP.

Chapter 6

The sun beat down on the farm all day, and that, combined with the heat, made Boruto's already-hard job harder. He had to carry hay bales into the horses' stable, about two at a time, which were both heavier than the heaviest weights he'd ever lifted combined. And he had to clean up after them every time they did their business. And he couldn't use chakra, which was just pouring salt on his wound, even though his dad said they could use chakra and jutsus. The farmer's excuse for not letting him use it boiled down to "You need to learn the value of hard work! Worst of all, Sarada seemed to take sick pleasure in seeing him struggle.

Sarada herself was having little trouble with her work, feeding and milking the cows, and she was visibly having fun doing it, even apparently making friends with the cows. Just the sight of it made Boruto wish he could throw up. Although he was sure the stench of the horses' shit would do that for him. If you've ever smelled a stable, you probably know how bad it can get.

But the worst part was the farm hands' mocking and derision all week. Perhaps spurred on by Sarada, they would point and laugh at him whenever he moped or complained about the hard work. Shoveling shit and feeding horses were not high on his list of ninja skills, and the farmhands apparently knew what he was thinking. "Put a little backbone into it, boy!" Ryu, the farmer, called out when he noticed Boruto struggled to shovel shit out of a horse stall.

"Yeah, just call it Shoveling Jutsu!" A voice called from outside.

"Get back to work, Yusuke!" Ryu shouted.

Boruto growled and went back to shoveling that shit.

That was yesterday. He was forced to bring himself back into the moment at the sound of a clanging bell. It wasn't the lunch bell. That

sounded differently. He turned around and glared at the farmhand Yusuke. He was laughing and holding a cowbell in his left hand. "Need help there, kid? Or are you gonna call your daddy for help?"

"Don't talk about my dad!" Boruto snapped with a tone that was supposed to be offended, but came across as defensive.

"Aw, did I hurt your feewings?" Yusuke taunted. "Daddy's not here, you gotta-OW!"

While he was busy mocking Boruto, Freyja had walked by and overheard his taunting. She got cross with him, marched up to him and strongly grabbed his ear. "What do you think you're doing!?" she asked in her detectable Fjordland accent.

"I wasn't doing anything, I-" Freyja tightened her grip on his ear, causing him to shout.

"Don't play dumb with me!" she shouted. "I saw and heard you harassing a 12-year-old boy! Have you any shame!?"

"B-b-b-b-but I was-"

"NO EXCUSE!" she interrupted. "We're trying to instill a work ethic in him, not bully him!"

"I'm sorry, ma'am!"

"Normally, where I'm from, we take care of *gellir* like you by... well, we are not in Fjordland, and you are a paid farmhand. But you should still be ashamed of yourself! APOLOGIZE! And afterwards, leave him alone. If I catch you anywhere near him besides when we eat lunch, I'll make you clean the stables by yourself, with a tiny shovel, and for no pay!"

She tossed Yusuke aside and pointed in a different direction. Yusuke ran off with no other prompting.

"Thanks," said Boruto.

"You're welcome, but remember we're not going easy on you," Freyja said, walking up to him so she could straighten out his shirt and the hay bales he carried.

"You said something about a work ethic," said Boruto.

"I could see it the moment I first saw you," said Freyja. "Your mother goes too easy on you. And from what I've heard, you've rewarded that by being a brat."

Boruto blushed and looked away, both in reaction to her insulting her mom, and to how she seemed so intent on mothering him. "Please don't talk about my mom like that," said Boruto.

"I'm sorry," said Freyja. "But, I've watched you. Yes, the work is hard, and I'm sorry that we're making you work without chakra. We'll inform your father about it-

"Don't talk about my dad!" Boruto interrupted.

"It's rude to interrupt," she said. "But, it sounds like you resent him a lot. I suppose part of it has something to do with his hokage duties. Speaking of which, I do *not* understand the need for child soldiers. Where I am from, our soldiers are all over 17."

"I don't care," said Boruto. "He's a bad dad! Why can't he just put a shadow clone in his office so he can visit me? He did that for Sakura Uchiha!"

His sudden outburst surprised Freyja, but she could only show it by raising a single eyebrow. Still, she straightened herself up. "I am sure you've heard this, but your father had to work hard to get to where he is," she said. "He was a jinchuriki, and a special one as that."

"Who cares!? I'm not-

"You are not your father, I know," said Freyja. "And I know what you might be thinking. But you know what? I agree. You are not your father. You shouldn't be forced to be something you're not. Is that what you fear?"

"Um, maybe," he said. Freyja chuckled.

"You are young," she said. "You can still discover who you really are. Wait, what was I talking about?"

"Uh, work ethic?"

"Right, of course!" Freyja lightly pounded her palm. "We've watched you work, and we do not like your attitude. You need to gain some appreciation for hard work! Hey! Where are you going!?"

"To finish my job!" Boruto snapped while he carried the heavy hay bales away. "And you're not making any sense!"

Freyja groaned, threw her hands up and down.

Unfortunately for Boruto, he had to let that feeling of frustration stew for a couple of hours while he continued working. It did help that the other farm hands left him alone. Presumably, Freyja had some discussions with them and they'd taken them to heart. It was a relief. Now he could work without the constant teasing and torment.

But it became clear to everyone else that there was more on his mind than just the teasing and the hard work. Freyja hadn't noticed it at first during her earlier discussion with him, but he seemed to flinch every time his father was mentioned. Now, obviously Freyja and everyone else chalked it up to his loud, vocal hatred of his father, as if they could ignore it. It was common knowledge that Boruto and Naruto didn't quite get along well, not just because he was so loud about it.

But the way he looked ready to lash out at others the more Naruto was mentioned hinted that there was more going on. In an attempt to

make peace, a farmhand tried to talk to him about how much he admired Naruto. In the midst of feeding chickens-he'd already finished with the horses-he turned and glared at the farmhand, his teeth clenching hard enough to hypothetically crack them like eggs. The farmhand wisely backed off.

One farmhand went up to Sarada and asked, "Is he okay?"

"Well, his dad yelled at him last week," she answered. "I guess he hasn't gotten over it?"

"That doesn't look like he was only yelled at," said the farmhand.

Sarada silently agreed.

It wasn't long before lunchtime. Freyja rang the lunch bell for everyone to hear, and the farmhands plus Team Konohamaru came to the main house to eat lunch.

It started out alright. Everyone gathered at the table, marveling at the selection, not just the local food, but from Fjordland. There was quite enough meat, rice, vegetables, fruit and milk for everyone to enjoy. Boruto wondered how Freyja could make all this, before remembering that she probably had plenty of time to begin with.

Ryu sat at the head of the table, Freyja at the other end, and everyone else sat in between. In a moment of apparent emotional masochism, Boruto sat across from Sarada and the farmhand Yusuke. Yusuke was not of Boruto's concern, and to be honest, neither was Sarada.

And why did he call himself masochistic?

" *Itadakimaaaaasu* !" Everyone sang the moment they were about to eat, and dug in.

Lunch went fairly well in the beginning. Everyone was in good spirits and the hospitality helped considerably. Boruto dug into some

chicken. It tasted strange. It wasn't the first time He had chicken from Freyja's homeland, but he still wasn't quite used to it. After a while, he looked up at Sarada, and at Mitsuki. Sarada was engrossed in her food, but Mitsuki was enjoying having some kind of a parental figure around. Unknowingly, he scowled at Mitsuki.

Things went well until Ryu decided now was a good time to speak. "I know now is not a good time," he said, being accidentally accurate, "But you should be careful going back to Konoha, Konohamaru."

"Oh? Why's that?"

"The Hokage told me he was tracking missing-nin in the area. I'm concerned."

Freyja scoffed. "Ah, they'll be fine, they can handle themselves. But I'm unhappy that the Hokage is still using child soldiers. I thought that was done away with."

"Genin aren't soldiers," said Konohamaru.

"Pardon my rudeness," said Freyja. "But I am still unfamiliar with the Land of Fire's customs. Especially it's military. If he was supposed to change the system, I feel the Hokage failed."

"Still," said Sarada, "He's ruled over the longest peace we've had in a long time."

"And I am thankful to Odin for that," said Freyja. "I just think he could do a better job."

"Well, of course," said Ryu, "The Hokage has made mistakes. I don't understand how he could let Sasuke Uchiha and Orochimaru go free after every-oh, Sarada, Mitsuki, I apologize. I did not mean to offend either of you."

"I'm not offended," said Sarada. "My dad tries to trick my mom to make it look like he cares about her. Bullshit. I can see through him."

He's a terrible dad!"

"Just like my dad!" Boruto added. That didn't please Sarada.

"At least you *have* a dad!" She spat.

"I'd rather not have a dad!" Boruto spat back. "He's the w-"

"WORST!? I've actually talked to him! I like him a lot more than *my* dad! He's had to work his butt off, just to get to where he is now!"

"You think he hasn't told me a gajillion times!?"

"Everyone tells you that, because they know what you really are; you're an ungrateful spoiled *brat* !" The table collectively gasped.

"Don't call me that!"

"Because it's *true* !?"

"SHUT UP!"

"MAKE ME!"

"Guys, *STOP* !" Konohamaru ordered.

"You'll never live up to *anything* your dad's ever done, and you know it, so you pretend he sucks!" Sarada continued.

"He sucks because he's never around!"

"So that's it? That's your excuse? MY dad abandoned me and my mom and pretends he still loves us-"

"You already said that!"

"Oh yeah, so what!?"

"Both of you!" Ryu shouted.

"You're just a whiny, selfish, *spoiled* nincompoop! You're a failure, and you blame your dad for it! But your mommy can't help you, because she's terrible mom!"

"SHUT UP ABOUT MY MOM!"

"THAT'S ENOUGH!" Ryu roared, standing up and grabbing Boruto by the collar while Mitsuki ran to the other side of the table.

"You're gonna take *her* side!?" Boruto shouted.

"I'm not," Mitsuki objected.

"Quit complaining about everything!" Sarada shot back. "You're not one to talk about a dad, because you still have one!"

"Boruto, what is going on!?" Freyja asked.

"MY MOM AND DAD ARE GOING TO MARRIAGE COUNSELLING!" he blurted out.

He immediately visibly regretted saying that. Everyone stared at him, wide-eyed and open-mouth, the atmosphere in the room completely changing as the silence fell. He blushed, freed himself from Ryu's grip and... sat back down. No one said anything, and he rubbed his face rather roughly. Following his unintentional lead, the rest of the guests and farmhands sat back down in their spots, looking from one person to the other, back to the food and back to everyone else. No one dared to break the awkward silence, not even Yusukey, who by now had begun to chew on his bottom lip and do his best to look away from Boruto.

Finally, Sarada gathered some noodles and began eating. The rest of the table followed suit.

Sakura had little time to prepare after her daughter set off for the farm this morning, for she had something very important to worry

about, and that was her house. Ino gave Sakura today off so she could go to her first appointment with the foreclosure attorney. It would be three-quarters of the way through the snake hour, and potentially take one or two hours. So she had to gather her bills, letters from the bank, and even the low-amount paystubs the hospital had given her.

She still needed to confront her boss at the hospital about it. Looking at one of the paystubs, she decided to call her boss. "Hello, this is Sakura Uchiha," she said. For some reason, she cringed at the surname. "I was just calling to ask if we can meet about my hours. Thank you. Good-bye."

With everything in hand, she departed to meet with the attorney.

She arrived on time, with a couple minutes to spare, so she sat down in the attorney's sadly-sterile waiting room. It reminded her of a hospital waiting room, but annoyed her instead of making her feel like she needed to cry. Maybe cry at how utterly bland it was, to be honest.

Her wait didn't last long, and the secretary poked her head out of the door. "Mrs. Uchiha?" She sounded like she wanted to vomit after saying that. It's not like Sakura wasn't already used to it, though.

The attorney was still working on some paperwork when she went in. "Ah, Mrs. Uchiha," he said, starting off pleasant, but biting back the bile from coming up to his mouth like his secretary. "Please, sit down."

"Thank you very much," Sakura said. She sat down.

"Now... I already understand your situation, but only a little bit of it," he said. "Did you bring anything else to help with?"

"Of course," she said, taking her documents out and laying them on the desk. The attorney took his time to look them over. It didn't help

Sakura's nervousness, but she wanted the attorney to do the job right, not poorly.

"So," he said, "Do you want me to save your house?"

"Yes," she said. "If you can."

His response, or more specifically lack thereof, was discouraging. He turned his gaze back to the documents for a moment. She leaned forward and saw that he was examining her bills and pay stubs.

"I'm not going to lie," he started, "But this won't be easy. When are they making you move out?"

"End of the month," she said. She prepared herself for the bad news. She could take it, right?

"I'll file an injunction," he said. "I can't guarantee anything, though. But since you've found some gainful employment in the meantime, I think we can get the bank to hold off on the foreclosure, so long as you can get enough money to pay these bills."

"Thank you," said Sakura. She was disappointed, but also unsurprised. So much had gone wrong for her in the post-war years, it was a surprise she made it through them. She glanced at her arm, glimpsing the long-faded scars she'd put there when she was in an even lower place than right now.

"Listen, it's not hopeless," said the attorney. "All we need to do is figure out a case, and maybe we can get something going, Mrs... Uchiha."

His pause made her pause. She slowly looked up at him. He'd already must've figured out that he'd said a bad thing, because he looked visibly unhappy with himself. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm sure you don't like it when people react to your name that way."

"It's alright," she said. "Actually... is there a case for discrimination?"

"Based on your... husband's... family name?" the attorney asked.

"Could you please stop doing that?"

"I apologize," the attorney replied, again getting agitated with himself. "It's just that I have my reasons for hating him, but-anyway. Discrimination? Might be hard."

"Is there a case?"

"If I can make it," said the attorney. "Do you have anything that might be incriminating?"

Sakura took a deep breath, and several emotions crossed her face. She'd been hiding this for a while now, despite believing otherwise, she had to own up to it. "The reason my boss at the hospital severely docked my hours... was because he found out that Sasuke and I are married. He's a new boss. My old one didn't seem to care."

The attorney happily raised his arm and slammed it on the desk. "Well then," he said triumphantly. "That's not my area of expertise, but I think we could have a case on the housing front. Again, we'll have to see if the bank is doing the same thing."

"Do you think so?"

"I doubt it," said the attorney. "Still, no reason not to try, eh?"

"Of course not," Sakura answered.

"Good," the attorney continued. He leaned forward. "Listen, I cannot guarantee you that a housing discrimination argument is going to work. The bank is going to argue that you can't pay the bills in good faith, and it looks like they have a solid case. However, if you're able to work things out with your hospital employer, I don't think it will be trouble. Remember, you have rights. There's plenty of legal avenues for you to pursue. We can even settle out of court and you can keep your house. Until then, respond to the foreclosure notice if you

haven't already, research the process. If I have to, I'll help you reach a settlement. Okay?"

"Okay," she answered. "Thank you very much."

She didn't get back home until much later, and she was exhausted despite not working at all. Well, to be fair, working to save her house almost certainly counts from a certain perspective. She wanted a drink of sake, but she forced that desire out of her mind before it could take hold.

And to her surprise, Sarada was already there waiting for her. "Hello, Sarada," she said. "How was it today?"

"It was good," she said. "But Boruto's having some trouble."

"Like what?"

"His mom and dad are going to marriage counselling."

Sakura couldn't say a thing.

Once again, I want to thank everyone for reading this story, except for the anonymous asshole on AO3 who said, and I quote, "You suck. Kill yourself, psycho virgin." Or another user on FF-dot-net who (correctly) assumed I hated naruhina, but flipped out because I'm writing a divorce fic and had to use some pretty sexist language to do so. And then came up with the excuse that they hate divorce, even though their behavior was inexcusable and shouldn't have acted that way in the first place.

If you don't like my fic, don't fuckin' read it. It's that simple.

Anyway.

One of the things I'm trying to do here is sort of put my own spin on Konoha's legal system. It's going to be necessary doing the road for obvious reasons. I also fully intended to use Freyja partly to comment on Konoha's culture and system from an outsider's perspective. It's tempting to let her go off on long rants, but there's a big degree of self-control in these kinds of things. And as for the foreclosure, this is mainly based on assumptions because I haven't seen much about it in canon. *shrugs*

If there's anything about Konoha's legal system that you think I should know from canon sources, please mention it politely and I'll try to address it.

Anyway, I hope you liked it! Please review!

Chapter 7

The day Naruto was dreading for a week and a half had finally come; the day he and Hinata were scheduled to attend their first marriage counseling session.

The morning of the session started well enough, but a few possible omens appeared before him. The most obvious one was at breakfast. Boruto and Himawari obviously knew about their parents' marriage counseling appointment. And they did not look happy that morning at breakfast.

First off, let's set the scene: There was no sun, just a gray, drab, dull, cloudy sky and a potential for rain outside their house. So there was no sunny rays bursting through the windows into the dining room. Everyone sat in their usual spots, with Naruto and Hinata at their respective ends, and Boruto and Himawari on the side. The food sat in front of them, but everyone lethargically reached for it instead of eagerly digging in. They made little sound, and whatever they did make was drowned out by the also-quiet-ish clock hanging over the table. Nobody said anything all breakfast. They only looked at each other with sad expressions and... okay, they did speak on occasion, but it was just to go through the morning motions.

Boruto and Himawari could barely even look at their parents, but they frequently shared worried and sad glances with each other. The only times they could actually look at their parents were few and far between. Boruto would look at his mom sadly, but glared at Naruto. Himawari couldn't glare at him if she tried, but her doe-eyes did enough to make him cringe.

And he didn't need to be psychic or whatever to see that he was damaging his relationship with Boruto even further than it already was. The extent of that damage probably wouldn't be seen for a while.

After today, however, he would not be able to deny the fact that things had not gone as he wanted them to anymore.

He looked at his rice bowl. It was empty, just like how he felt right now. He looked up at Hinata, thinking that seeing her could make him feel better. It didn't. He could also see that she was sad, and he felt bad for her, no question. But he didn't feel the need to walk up to her and kiss her. It would be a gesture as empty as the bowl in front of him. What's so useful about an empty bowl, anyway?

He lingered at the table, staring at that empty bowl for several minutes after breakfast ended; Boruto and Himawari had already gotten up to leave, but not before Boruto shot one more glare at his father. Naruto supposed he deserved it, in a sense.

Hinata got up as well and started cleaning the dishes. Naruto thought about getting up to help her more than once until he finally did. He asked her if she needed help, but she declined. She was just about done, already. Again, he showed no emotion to her reaction. And he had to wonder what was going on.

They had married at 19. He'd overheard someone saying that marriages like that only work if they were arranged, but he'd ignored that comment. It wasn't from one of his friends, anyway, and he felt like he had something good with Hinata. She was the first person he ever really loved. He only had a childish crush on Sakura because of his rivalry with Sasuke.

Did he really?

That doubt was creeping back into his head, and he physically shook it to figuratively get it out. There was no need to get worried. He was just going through a rough patch in the marriage, nothing more. He had faith that the counsellor could help them fix whatever patch they were facing.

The appointment was set for midday, halfway through the horse hour. They had plenty of time to work on what they wanted to

discuss with the counsellor.

But they didn't. Naruto should've seen it as yet another omen.

Checking up on Boruto for just a moment, he was still very despondent when he arrived at Sarada's house to pick her up for the trip to the farm again. He and Mistuki waited for a couple minutes until Sarada emerged from the house with Mrs. Uchiha in tow. Mitsuki happily greeted both of them, but had to nudge Boruto to do the same. The other genin could only grudgingly wave at Sakura, who was getting ready for her long-awaited hospital shift.

"Happy to see me as always," said Sarada.

"That's not nice, Sarada," said Sakura. "Boruto, I'm really sorry you're going through this. I can only imagine. I hope your parents can make it up." Boruto scoffed and crossed his arms. Sakura grimaced. "That's not very nice."

"Shut up! You're not my mom!"

"Don't talk to me like that!" Sakura snapped back. "You talk to your mother like that, don't you? She doesn't deserve it! But you know what? I agree with Sarada! She's been too easy on you! Why, if I was your mom-"

" *Moooooom!* "

"Oh, sorry, Sarada," Sakura said. "Go on ahead. I have to get to work soon, Have fun!"

Team Konohamaru left for the farm.

The marriage counsellor's waiting room was a drab white, a sickening blandness that gave Naruto and Hinata no confidence at all. The minutes they spent waiting for the counselor to meet with them seemed to drag on like hours, and the ticking clock only

seemed to punctuate that. Said clock was making the only other sound in the room, besides the clacking of Hinata's sewing needles. Naruto looked aside to her and could see that this was probably hurting her more than it was hurting him. He genuinely admired her kindness. But was it really enough?

He sighed and looked away from his sad wife.

How did it get to this? Did he make the wrong choice in marrying Hinata?

"Lord Hokage?" the receptionist asked, interrupting his thoughts. "The counsellor will see you now."

The counsellor sat behind his desk, working on some papers. He only looked a couple of years older than Naruto and Hinata. And although he was almost certainly a Land of Fire native, he didn't look like he was from Konoha.

The counsellor looked up and almost fell out of his seat, but regained his seat. "Welcome, Lord Hokage," he said. "I forgot that it was you."

"It's okay," said Naruto. Prompted by the counsellor's gesture, he and Hinata sat down on the tatami at the kotatsu opposite his desk. The counsellor stood up and walked over to sit down at the other end.

"I confess that I never expected to meet with the Hokage," he started, trying to force an awkward laugh that made himself cringe. "Apologies. So, let's try to get comfortable. Please, have some tea." He gestured to the teapot. "I'll need to talk to both of you individually first, and then we can talk together. Does that sound good to you?"

"Sure," said Naruto.

"I'd rather not," Hinata answered.

The counsellor shrugged. "That's fine. I don't want to force either of you to do anything you don't want to do. How about we just start here?"

"I guess so," said Naruto. He didn't like the counsellor's reaction to raise his eyebrows and write something down on his paper. Never a good sign.

"So what prompted you to come to counselling?" The counsellor asked.

"It was my idea," said Naruto. "I've felt that our marriage has felt strange lately."

"I never noticed," said Hinata.

The counsellor hissed and wrote it down. Another bad sign.

"Well, sometimes it just takes one partner to notice that something's wrong," said the counsellor. "It's not your fault, Lady Hinata. What made you decide to do it?"

"I was talking with one of my advisors," said Naruto. "I think he just made an offhand comment, but he also said he didn't want to get involved in my private affairs."

"What else, Lord Hokage? Tell me when you both got married."

"We were 19," said Naruto.

The counsellor shrugged.

"I've been in love with Naruto since we were children," said Hinata. "We used to play together. And he once stood up for me. And we grew closer after Neji was killed in battle."

The counsellor looked up from his notes and raised an eyebrow.

"And then I fell in love with her after a genjutsu showed how we used to play together," said Naruto.

The counsellor's reaction gave Naruto a knot in his stomach. He may have been trying to keep an open mind and remain non-judgmental, but he rolled his eyes and sighed. "I'm sorry," he said. "What did you love about each other?"

"Well, she played with me," said Naruto.

"He's a brave person," she said. "I always admired how he stuck up for his friends and for others."

"Well, Hinata's reason sounds good," said the counsellor. "But Naruto, are you sure?"

"Well, after we stopped playing, I kinda got a crush on Sakura Haruno," he said, "Because she liked Sasuke Uchiha-" the counsellor hissed. "-And I didn't notice her that much except whenever she did things like nearly get herself killed for my sake when I asked her not to. For a while, I thought she was a stalker."

"Is that true, Naruto?"

Naruto froze. The counsellor cringed. All three were silent for a few awkward moments before the counsellor cleared his throat. "Well, I guess being shunned because of the Nine-Tails made me desperate," said Naruto.

"Let's move on," said the counsellor. "What are things like at home?"

"Things at home are why I wanted to come to counselling," said Naruto. "I haven't been able to visit with my family. I'm so swamped with work that when I come home, I'm exhausted and go right to bed. Because of that, my son hates me. I just yelled at him a couple weeks ago and I haven't been able to reconcile with him yet. It just feels... I don't know. Whatever feelings I've had for Hinata, I want to say I still have them, but..."

"But what?"

"I feel like I'm always tired," Naruto continued. "I tried to kiss her not long ago, and I didn't feel a..."

"Spark?"

"Yeah, a spark!"

"Well, it's perfectly normal for a flame in a relationship to dim," said the counsellor.

"And I've had dreams that-"

"Dream?" the marriage counsellor looked up from his notepad, his eyes widened just a little bit. "What dream? Can you tell me about it?"

Naruto reached into his jacket and pulled out the piece of paper he'd written the dream's synopsis on, with Hinata's surprised look following him the whole time. He could only glance aside to her as he was doing this. But he couldn't even look at her whilst he did this. For his part, the marriage counsellor listened intently, only looking down at his notes so he could take said notes as Naruto read from the paper. He'd stop on occasion, ask Naruto to repeat what he just said, and then keep writing. His expression turned bewildered when Naruto described the dream's climax, the part where he saw Hinata watching him as the nightmarish mob consumed him.

Then Naruto told him about the eyes that stared at him. The counsellor wrote down several paragraphs on two sheets of paper, looking up from the notes to nonverbally ask Naruto to clarify anything he was talking about. When Naruto finished, the counsellor looked back at his notes and read through them. Then he looked at the clock. Fifteen minutes hadn't even passed. The counsellor cringed again.

Looking between Naruto and Hinata, he could see the guilt in the Hokage's expression, and the confusion in hers. He knew that they had come to counselling because they-or at least the Hokage-saw a slimmer of hope to save their marriage. "It's not my job to force couples to stay together," he said. "But since you both came to me, I'm going to try to do what I can. As far as I can see, there's still a window for us to work through. Now, I'm not letting you two go just yet. We still have 45 minutes left in this session. I have some thoughts on this marriage's direction, but I'm going to save them for later. How does that sound?"

"It sounds good," said Naruto.

"I agree," said Hinata.

"Good. But, for the record, just so I'm not lying to you, I think this marriage needs help. I'm going to do my best, but I can't guarantee anything."

He hid the page where a note read, "Opinion: POSSIBLY UNSALVAGEABLE."

Today may have been Sakura's only day she had a hospital shift, but she felt a great sense of relief the moment she walked inside. It had been far too long since she was able to work her calling.

It felt like a homecoming, in a lot of ways. She couldn't contain the smile that was trying to break out on her lips as she walked through the halls, first to the locker room so she could change into her hospital outfit, and second to her office as Attending Physician/Surgeon; those were basically the official titles for a top medical ninja working at the hospital.

Everyone happily greeted her in the hallway. It didn't take much to assume that they did miss her. She'd heard stories from everyone else that they'd been sticking up for her to the stubborn Chief of Medicine, but no luck to get her reinstated to her full-time status.

That reminder made her sigh. She would have to get answers as to why the Chief of Medicine had severely docked her hours. She didn't want to admit discrimination, but she would if it was necessary.

Settling back into her office felt like returning to an old bedroom, and settling in at the desk proper was like climbing into your favorite bed. She didn't want to go to sleep, of course. She just got here. And she'd be on the clock for the next ten hours. But it was a similar feeling.

After taking several minutes to look over some patient files, she left her office to begin making her rounds.

Back in the war days, her main job was to heal devastating war injuries. Now she helped heal bones broken in a fall off the roof. It did take a while to get used to, but now she liked healing mundane injuries instead of war wounds. There was a lot less stress involved.

Today, she confidently walked the halls, surrounded by people she knew and loved. She didn't stop smiling, or should it be said, wouldn't stop smiling for the first hour she was there. Telling a cancer patient they were going to die erased that smile, for the obvious reasons.

Then she ran into the Chief of Medicine two hours into her shift.

He walked up to her as she talked to a patient who was suffering from a knee injury sustained in a fall. He stopped and watched over her shoulder, and got a bit too close. She took in a deep breath, trying to put him out of her thoughts, even though she would rather turn around and sock him. But that would mean she'd be fired on the spot. She wanted to do a lot of things, but she was in an obvious predicament.

But she did what she could, moving closer to the injured patient and laying a comforting hand on the obviously-appreciative patient. "You're very brave," she said. The patient smiled.

When she was finished with the patient, she turned to the Chief of Medicine, who smiled at her. "I need to talk to you about my hours," she said. She had a tape recorder with her just for this occasion.

"Of course," he nodded.

They left the ICU to go to the Chief of Medicine's office. He sat down at his desk, and she sat down, too, secretly pressing the recorder's "record" button.

"Please don't stand so close to me again," she told him. "It's uncomfortable."

"I thought this had to do with your hours."

"I thought I'd tell you right now," she said. "Anyway, you probably know that I'm sinking in debt, and I'm looking at foreclosure, and I had to get a second job. I wanted to find out why you docked my hours after all the service I've put in for the village and the hospital."

"Ah," he said. "I'm sorry to hear that. Unfortunately, I hate to inform you that it was because of a string of bad performance at the time. Do you remember losing a patient who was suffering from a very treatable illness?"

Sakura paused. She did remember it. And she was in her bad place at the time. "Yes," she said. "I apologized to the family."

"An apology isn't enough," said the Chief of Medicine. "Do not worry about your job security. As you said, I've put in years of service to the village and hospital, and you are truly one of the best medical ninjas we've ever seen. But the fact of the matter is, you dropped the ball. And if other doctors can do a more consistent job, then I'll give them a chance."

That was not a compliment. Sakura sighed. She concluded that she hated this Chief of Medicine. She needed him out, ASAP.

"I thought it was because of whom I married," she said.

"No, of course not," he said with a smile. "No one's complained about your last name, even though Sasuke Uchiha is a traitor, terrorist, murder who got off easy because he was friends with the Hokage."

Sakura was glad to know that he didn't like Sasuke. At least he was honest.

"Let's face it, the Uchiha have been a parasite on this village," he continued. "Just because they helped found it doesn't mean they have the right to act like spoiled children and cause a war when they don't get their way. Curse of Hatred. Puh! Lousy excuse!"

"Okay, I think I need to continue my rounds," Sakura said, standing up to leave. "But... is there a chance I can get back to full-time?"

"Aaaaabsolutely!" The chief of medicine answered. "Just give me a couple days, and I'll see what I can do."

Sakura smiled, nodded her head and left. She pressed "stop" on the tape recorder, confident that she had all the evidence she needed.

It was nearing the end of the marriage counselling session. Naruto and Hinata seemed to have a productive session under the counsellor's watch.

But, like said, it was nearing the end. They sat at the table, watching the counsellor going over his notes. Naruto's hands fidgeted and he reached out to touch Hinata's hand. What should have been a calming moment for him, once he took her hand, didn't calm him down. He just stayed nervous. Yet another bad sign.

"Well, I think this has been a good session," said the counsellor. "But... are you alright if I share my opinions on this marriage?"

Naruto's stomach clenched, but he nodded, anyway.

The counsellor hissed through his teeth. "This marriage is a bad joke."

Naruto's stomach unclenched and his heart sank.

"I just... I just don't know how this has worked for... 13 years?" The counsellor started. "I give you credit for trying, and I admit there may have been some spark at the beginning, but it seems to me, judging by the Hokage's words, that it burned out pretty quickly. At least on the Hokage's end. It seems to me more like this marriage has only benefitted Lady Hinata."

Her jaw dropped.

"I'm perfectly aware that this is only the first meeting, and I haven't heard enough from Lady Hinata," the counsellor continued. "But, at least for Lord Hokage, this seems to have been a drain on him. I don't think either of you is a good match for each other."

"I know this isn't an arranged marriage," the counsellor continued, "But this has the mark of an obvious and obviously awful arranged marriage."

"A-arranged!?" Naruto sputtered.

"Yeah, arranged," said the counsellor. "Actually, I shouldn't be saying it like that, because arranged marriages are at least honest about what they are. Lord Hokage, do you want me to help you or do you want me to lie to you, like you've been lying to yourself?"

His words struck Naruto like a hard punch. Automatically, he thought of some words he'd spoken once; "*I hate people who lie to themselves!*"

"What are you saying?" Hinata asked.

"Lord Hokage, you only married her because she was nice to you a long time ago," said the counsellor. "That's not a healthy basis for a long-lasting relationship. Strong relationships are built on trust, respect, familiarity, admiration and dedication. I know this is just our first time, but I've seen none of that here. I can still help you save your marriage. It will take a lot of work, though. Starting with the fact that, judging by his dream, the Lord Hokage resents Lady Hinata!

"I think one of the problems is that, Lord Hokage, you're miserable because you know this is a lie, deep down. Or she's having a parasitic effect on you. Apologies, Lady Hinata, I mean no disrespect. But, like I said, you probably resent her. But I think it might be for the best if the both of you re-evaluate your relationship yourselves. It'll be fun homework!

"I'm sorry if I seemed rude," he finished. "I want you two to succeed, as well. But it will take a lot of work. In the meantime, it looks like our time is up for the day. Sorry if I couldn't do enough."

"Thank you," said Naruto.

"Thank you for coming!" The counsellor asked as he watched them both get up and leave the room looking like they had no idea what just happened.

So, how was that?

First, I want to admit that I've never been to marriage counseling, because I haven't needed it yet. However, I feel like I've done what I've needed to at least get a basic idea of what it's like. If not, let me know and I'll try to address it. At the same time, I've anticipated this moment for a while now, and I can finally get my utter hatred of naru/hina off my chest. For anyone who agrees with me, you're welcome.

As for Sakura, I hope that I've done an okay job with her. I recognize that I could potentially contradict my beliefs on Sasuke and the

Uchiha clan (I don't like either, and I blame him for many of her problems) when it's obvious she's been discriminated against because of who she married. I've already started to take that into consideration, but as I said, I fully appreciate and welcome feedback.

I also want to thank everyone for reading this and all the feedback I've gotten! Luckily, I didn't get suicide bait or trolls, but I did get some constructive feedback on Freyja and her role. I'll address it in the text later, but I'll summarize her culture right now: She comes from a medieval Scandinavian/viking country, whose culture is not unlike modern Scandinavia's to an extent, and I hope to flesh it out going forward.

In the meantime, please review this current chapter!

Chapter 8

The initial shock of the counsellor's assessment of their relationship had yet to pass by the time Naruto and Hinata returned home. They said nothing, for there was nothing really to say, or at least that they could think of. Both of them wanted to just toss the counsellor's diagnosis out the window and live in wedded bliss, but it was just about impossible now. It might take some time, but they were probably going to realize that they had been lying to each other and themselves, that this marriage wasn't even worth being called such.

They both went to familiar spots upon returning. Naruto went straight to the dining room table to read the nice tablecloth. Hinata went straight to the kitchen. And it didn't take long for her to start on her thing, as Naruto could hear the sounds coming from the kitchen. They were kitchen sounds, and the sound of her singing to herself.

She always did that. She always let herself get lost in her own little world. No matter what, whenever something went difficult, she would retreat to the kitchen, her knitting, and her own little world. It wasn't always this way, but he noticed that it was becoming more prominent lately. This was, he figured, just her way of dealing with a stressful situation.

And yet, he couldn't for the life of him understand how she could be so chipper in this situation, that their marriage had been a sham the whole time, at least to someone else. Thinking about it, he suspected that must be why Hinata appeared to take little care into the assessment; she probably didn't think that the counsellor's conclusion was worth thinking about. It was a thought that Naruto wanted to entertain himself, but the words "*I hate people who lie to themselves*" echoed in his thoughts again. It made him groan and rub his face.

He internally begged for Boruto to take the stupid train back, but remembered that said train would probably be delayed. They'd done

well enough doing things the old-fashioned way... but then he remembered those missing-nin hiding out there somewhere. That didn't help matters at all.

What did genuinely matter was that, no matter how much he tried to sweep it under the rug, he knew, deep down, that things were not going to be the same. And yet he still felt the urge/need to get his marriage in order. The other scenario kept creeping into his mind, but he wouldn't say what it was, nor would he want to acknowledge the possibility.

He'd be in big trouble with the public if he so much as considered *that* option.

But although *that* option would only bring public scorn-he glanced at a tabloid newspaper declaring that there was 'TROUBLE IN HOKAGE'S HOUSE'-it wouldn't get him into legal trouble at all. Plus, he worried that jumping into *that* without thinking would lead to devastating consequences, especially for his family.

His family.

He sighed. Boruto already hated him. He kept trying to make it up to Boruto. But Boruto loved his mom more than his dad, and he didn't need another reason to hate him.

Well, until he could actually figure things out, there was no sense in keeping his thoughts to himself. He stood up, picked the tabloid up and threw it away. Then he went into the kitchen.

Hinata was busy, already working on dinner, with the pots and plates scattered about in an orderly manner. Yes, that was a good thing about her, which he appreciated, but watching her make dinner didn't ignite the spark that he wanted to feel. Instead, his expression remained neutral, and his chest felt nice and loose. Good for his heart, of course, after that sodium-heavy diet of his childhood, but not so much in the realms of love. He did chalk it up to the spark dwindling after years of familiarity, of course. He always got the

same, tight-chested way with Sakura, but familiarity made that funny feeling go away after a while, replaced by easiness and comfort around her.

Wait, why was he thinking about Sakura?

He shook his head to clear his mind. He slipped, accidentally knocking a pan off the counter. It fell to the floor with a loud "CLANG". He hurriedly bent down and picked up the pan to put it back.

Hinata's only reaction was to turn her head towards him and then turn her head back to the task at hand. It concerned Naruto. Was she angry? Was she in denial?

He carefully entered the kitchen, so he couldn't disturb her, although he didn't fear her when she was interrupted-she could never be scary, even when she tried to put on the scary mom act to Boruto.

Scary mom act? He didn't remember her doing that while the kids were growing up. It only started with Boruto's discipline problems. And even then, she never was quite able to intimidate Naruto. Why? The simplest explanation was because Naruto knew that she never quite could intimidate an opponent back when they were ninjas. He certainly knew her well enough, but the counsellor's words kept echoing in his head, telling him that she'd been a parasitic feature in his life. He didn't want to believe that; he loved Hinata.

But what did he love about her? He loved her assertiveness? She never was assertive until the mission to save Hanabi. Why?

"Hinata?" He asked after finally gathering the guts to talk to her. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine, Naruto," she said, turning to smile at him with her eyes closed.

"Are you sure?"

"I'm positive," she answered. "It's just the counsellor's opinion, after all. We should get a second opinion."

He admitted it wasn't a bad idea. But he could tell there was more underneath her reaction. "Are you positive?"

"Of course, I am," she insisted, turning to Naruto. But he could see that she was on the verge of tears and struggling to remain composed. Guilt immediately struck Naruto, and he moved to try to comfort her, but she moved away from him. He tried to consider what she was going through. She was doubtlessly conflicted about the whole thing, no matter how much she tried to deny the internal typhoon. "I love you. You love me." He knew that she was trying to sound confident, but he couldn't help but hear it like she was in denial.

"Hinata, we can get through this," he pleaded.

"We already have," she said.

"We can get a second opinion."

"We don't need one."

"But the counsellor-"

"Those clocks we got for our wedding," she said. "They represent our love. It's timeless." He could see the tears starting to form in the corners of her eyes.

"Yeah," he said. "Hinata, I really think we need to reconsider everything. Please, for the kids."

"We don't need to reconsider," she said.

"Yes, we do."

"NO!" she threw the spoon she was using into the boiling pot.

Both stayed quiet for several impossibly-long moments. Naruto had backed off, but he didn't look scared or anything, just surprised. He watched Hinata try to regather herself, as if she had things under control, but he didn't know for certain. She doubtlessly didn't want this marriage to end, after she'd tried so hard to win his affections. And then Naruto could see that the counsellor did in fact have a point, and he couldn't deny it. It wasn't about him, it was all about her. He did want her to be happy, no question, but maybe it shouldn't have been with him.

But he still would not consider *that* just yet, not while there was still a window of opportunity to save his marriage, and maybe rediscover why he fell for her.

She was conflicted, alright; torn between keeping up the façade of denial and lies. But deep down, she also feared that the seemingly idyllic life that she desired with the boy of her dreams was coming to an end.

The clocks kept ticking.

"Agh, why can't we just get going already!?"

"Because we don't need to, Boruto!" Sarada sighed back.

"Shut up, I wanna get going!"

Team Konohamaru had finished up yet another long, tiring day of farm work. The sky remained overcast, but there was no chance of rain, much to Ryu's displeasure, for this meant that he'd need to use more irrigation water to care for his crops. But, as this was a smaller, livestock-oriented farm, that mattered little. Anyway, besides that, work went on as usual. Boruto buried himself, or at least tried to focus on the work at hand, which mainly required him to feed some of the animals, specifically, cows and pigs. He diligently ran in between both the barn and the pig stall, carrying both sets of feed

under Freyja's proud, watchful eyes. She even rewarded him with a longer break, but after lunch.

But he couldn't quite get past the elephant in the room, and that was his parents' marriage counselling session set for the same day. He didn't tell anyone about it, but they already knew it was happening, in a sense giving him less of a need to talk about it. Like he wanted to. And although Freyja was proud to watch him gaining this apparent work ethic, she still felt sad for him, knowing that he was going through a lot. She even tried to console him, but he brushed her off. This would have drawn her ire on previous days, but it didn't this time. Instead, she sympathetically watched him continue to work, despite the inner typhoon he was going through.

"Alright kids, don't start anything now," Ryu lightly warned. "I can tell you kids are tired. You all worked really hard today, so I'll give you tomorrow off." Team Konohamaru cheered.

Ryu had also noticed Boruto's inner struggles, although that's not surprising, given how Boruto made it incredibly obvious, and he already knew about the marriage counselling. Still, he walked over to Boruto while he'd been carrying feed to the pig sty to help him. Boruto refused his offer. He didn't like it at all.

"Boruto, if you need to talk to someone, we're here to listen," he told him. Boruto scoffed and looked away.

"Thanks for everything," Konohamaru told Ryu. "When do you need us back?"

"You can come back in two days," Ryu answered. "That boy needs some time to recuperate." He pointed to Boruto.

As for Mitsuki, he'd walked up to Freyja as she was watching everything. He stared at her for a couple moments, looked away when he felt the situation's awkwardness, and then turned back to her. "You said you're from Fjordland," he said. It sounded like a statement. "I thought they used to be savages."

Freyja gasped a laugh, although she looked as if she was caught between being offended and not offended. She still re-gathered herself. "Times change," she said. "We've moved past that. We're an enlightened society now."

"Didn't you have child soldiers? Why do you keep talking about your army?"

"We don't *have* child soldiers," she answered. "Not anymore. Actually, we never had them, children just learned to fight from a young age. Our all-volunteer military only allows everyone over 17 now."

"Mitsuki, that wasn't necessary, or nice," Konohamaru said after catching wind of his questions. Mitsuki quizzically stared at him.

"The boy was curious," Freyja replied. "I'm happy to answer!"

"But we should still be going," said Konohamaru.

As this went on, the missing-nin who'd been off on the side for the past several chapters watched the departure taking place. Although they'd been tempted to attack the children for the past two weeks, they'd refrained from doing so. But now, the Hokage was having domestic issues that were quite obviously taking their toll on his bratty son. The group's leader held his hand up, but looking at Shiro, who'd recently gotten in trouble for being too rash, smiled. Shiro smiled back. Now was the perfect opportunity.

They turned back to the farm. They watched Team Konohamaru bid goodbye to the farmer and his wife for the day and depart. They watched them walk off, until they got to the trees, and then leapt into them. The outlaw ninjas hid from the Konoa ninjas and waited for them to pass by. Once they left, they turned around and immediately followed them.

But they made a mistake. Shiro, the rash ninja, broke a branch off and neglected to notice that it fell to the ground. It landed outside the

farm, catching Freyja's attention. She looked up and saw the shadows of the outlaw ninjas. Immediately, her eyes narrowed. "Ryu," she said. "Get my sword, shield, horse and some farmhands."

"What's wrong?" Ryu asked.

"Someone is stalking them."

Boruto had to put on a brave face while they jumped through the trees, not just because he was supposed to be a brave ninja, the Hokage's son, yadda, yadda, yadda, but because he could lose his balance and fall if he was distracted. But he was falling behind everyone else, so much that they had to stop every couple of trees so he could catch up. Each time they did, he glared at them, but wilted under Sarada's stronger glare. Konohamaru and Mitsuki didn't glare, but they were getting visibly impatient, and it only served to make Boruto glare back at them.

"Are you gonna keep us waiting?" Sarada accused.

"Then why don't I just go ahead!?" Boruto snapped back.

Before Sarada could say anything, Boruto jumped off to the first branch. She sighed, groaned, threw her hands up and rolled her eyes to the sky. Some people liked to compare her and Boruto to their mother and father respectively, but she didn't see it. Naruto had a reason to lash out. Boruto was just a brat. Sakura had a reason to come to respect Naruto. Sarada wondered if Boruto was even worthy of being a friend.

She let that thought go when Konohamaru and Mitsuki took off after Boruto. She wasn't going to fall behind those two! So she also took off.

Shortly later, the outlaw ninjas passed by the same tree. Freyja, riding a horse and leading some of the farmhands, passed by as well.

Team Konohamaru continued on, unaware of the oncoming threat. That was because an argument between Boruto and Sarada started. It went the way it usually went; Sarada insulted Boruto, calling him a 'brat', and Boruto complaining about Naruto being an awful father. Sarada of course reminded him that at least he had a father, and he shouldn't take that for granted, because Sasuke was a jerk. Boruto didn't have an answer for that, but he did tell her that all she did was derailing the argument.

Already getting tired of this argument, Boruto jumped ahead of them. But he was so focused on the front that he didn't bother to look up and see the outlaw ninjas trailing him from above. They'd gone to the upper branches a couple hundred meters behind so they could catch up and take them by surprise.

Without warning, he felt a hard kick to his back.

" *BORUTO!*" his teammates screamed. Three more ninjas dropped down from above and struck Konohamaru, Mitsuki and Sarada, sending all of them crashing to the ground. But they managed to catch themselves and land safely. But the other three ninjas landed with them, and started fighting them. They all tried to get to Boruto, but those outlaws moved them away from each other, and away from Boruto, most importantly.

Boruto did manage to land safely, but he found himself facing down a man with a Konoha symbol scratched out on his forehead protector.

"Who are you and what do you want!?" Boruto demanded. "Don't you know who I am!?"

"You're Boruto Uzumaki, the son of the Seventh Hokage, Naruto Uzumaki," the man answered. "My name is Jiro, I am a former ninja of Konoha myself, until your father had me expelled from the force!"

"What's that supposed to mean!?"

"It means I will have my revenge on the Hokage, either directly or indirectly!"

"Wait, what!?"

Boruto had no time to react to Jiro's punches. The older ninja threw a barrage of them, forcing Boruto backwards towards a distant tree. The younger ninja fought back, blocking Jiro's strikes, and finally getting a reverse roundhouse kick off that threw Jiro off. However, he felt a sharp pain in his back, which made him stumble. He could see Jiro's satisfied smirk from a distance. It made him growl. "SHADOW CLONE JUTSU!"

Two shadow clones materialized on his right and left. He held his right hand out for the one on that side to help him make a Rasengan. Once that was complete, he ran forward. The two shadow clones jumped off to the side and grabbed Jiro's arms, keeping him in place. Or so Boruto thought.

Jiro sweep-kicked both shadow clones off their feet. Both of them dissipated in clouds when they hit the ground. Boruto gasped, but he was too close to Jiro to stop. "RASENGAN!" he pushed the Rasengan at Jiro. It looked like he was going to get the older ninja.

But Jiro jumped up and dodged the attack at the last second. Boruto gasped once, then a second time when he felt Jiro kick him in the back. Boruto fell forward and hit the ground face-first.

"Is this what the Seventh's son is capable of!?" Jiro spat. "You should be aiming to be just like your father!"

"DON'T COMPARE ME TO HIM!" Boruto screamed as he got back up and punched Jiro. But his strike missed and Jiro jumped away.

"HANG ON, BORUTO!" Konohamaru called. Easier said than done, of course. Shiro, the Waves land ninja, had him bound with a stretching jutsu. Konohamaru struggled to break free from Shiro's stretched arm, but the grip was stronger than he anticipated. His

arms were pinned at the sides. So much for using his Wrist Ninja Tool.

But he could still use his feet.

He jumped, vaulted off the nearest tree and flew in to kick Shiro's face in. The gambit paid off. Shiro's grip loosened and Konohamaru was able to take a scroll and put it in his Ninja Tool. A Rasengan materialized and he shot the energy ball at Shiro, who jumped away. Konohamaru landed, looked up and saw Shiro expanding his right hand. Konohamaru gasped and jumped away just in time to avoid the massive fist that crashed into the ground. Konohamaru took the opportunity to run up to Shiro and punch him. Shiro blocked and countered, Konohamaru dodged the punch and kicked him again.

The loud crash momentarily distracted Mitsuki, and he didn't see long wooden beams coming towards him until it was almost too late. The ninja he fought made another Wood Style hand sign and placed his hand on one of the beams. The new beam shot out at Mitsuki, but barely missed. Mitsuki still grunted as he felt it graze his left arm. He gasped when he saw wooden kunai flying towards him, forcing him to extend his arm to grab at the ninja attacking him. He managed to get a grip on the man's wrists and he pulled him towards him. He was just about ready to kick the man when he kicked Mitsuki's lower jaw.

Stunned, Mitsuki stretched out to grab a branch and managed to catch it. But the ninja he was facing made another sign, pulled and broke it off. Mitsuki still managed to wrap his left arm around the branch and swung around to meet the ninja. He raised his fist and punched the ninja, but had to let go when he saw splinters exploding from the tree, forcing him to let go and twist his body around to miss them. When he looked he saw that it was not his opponent, but a Sarada punch. But this momentary distraction left him open and he felt the hard blow in his stomach.

Sarada couldn't worry about Mitsuki. Her opponent had jumped up in the air and was about to bring his sword down on her. The man fell

to the ground. Sarada pulled her arm out of the busted tree trunk and jumped several meters away as the sword buried itself in the ground. This gave Sarada a chance. "CHAAAAAAA!" She raised her fist, focused her chakra into that fist and threw another hard punch. She missed again, but swung around and reverse roundhouse kicked her opponent, who also wore a forehead protector with a crossed-out Leaf symbol.

The man rolled away and tried to pull his sword out of the ground. He struggled, for the sword was so deeply embedded that he could not get it out. Sarada saw her chance. She drew a kunai, raced towards the ninja and brought it down upon him!

Then she felt a hard blow to her stomach. She lost her breath once and a second time after the ninja elbowed her in the back. She landed face-first in the ground. Struggling to catch her breath, she got up on her elbows. Another blow to her back. This time, it was the man's foot pushing her down. Focusing her chakra into her arms, she pushed up, throwing him off her back. Now she had her chance, and punched him. But she saw something else that scared her.

Boruto was in big trouble. Jiro had taken out his shadow clones and Rasengan, and was still taunting him. Now he had the boy on the ropes, leaning against a tree trunk and struggling to fight back. He was covered in cuts, dirt and bruises. Jiro barely had a scratch on him.

"Is this the best you can do, boy!?" he snarled. "I fought your father once. You take after him more than you're willing to admit."

"SHUT UP!"

"Testy, are we?" he chuckled. "Give up, kid!"

"I never give up! That's my Ninja Way!"

"I told you," Jiro rolled his eyes. But he readied himself for Boruto's next attack.

Boruto screamed and ran forward, summoning a Rasengan. Jiro jumped out of the way as Boruto threw it and stepped behind him. He kicked him again. Boruto fell to the ground, but got right back up. He ran back towards Jiro, drawing a kunai. Jiro drew his own kunai and blocked Boruto's strike. They both struggled, pushing against each other for dominance. Finally, Jiro got his boot in between Boruto's leg, hooked his ankle and pulled it out from under him.

Boruto wore a bewildered expression for a moment, then he gasped as Jiro kicked him hard in the stomach. He felt a sharp pain in that area, and on the side. He was relieved when Jiro took his leg away, but it didn't last long.

Suddenly, he felt an agonizing pain shoot through his entire back. He could feel Jiro's foot in his back. He screamed. A flock of birds flew away. In his back, he could feel something snap and it didn't feel good at all. He fell face-first to the ground, his back in incredible agony. He tried to move, but the pain shot through his entire body whenever he tried. Worst of all, he could barely feel his legs.

Terror gripped him. He screamed again when Jiro pressed his foot down on the spot in his back where the pain was the worst. "Look at you," he heard Jiro taunt. "Helpless! You're no prodigy! At least not anymore!"

" *BORUTO!* " His teammates screamed. But the other three outlaws had them on the ropes, too. Shiro held Konohamaru above the ground, his stretched arm wrapped around him. Mitsuki was trapped in a wooden cage. And Sarada was also pinned to the ground, but getting close to getting up.

"Never send a boy to do a man's work!" Jiro taunted. He drew a kunai.

" *TYYYRRRRRRR!* "

The woman's cry gave Team Konohamaru the opening they needed. Konohamaru himself was able to free his left arm from Shiro's

loosened grip and used the shadow jutsu scroll he'd already put in his Ninja Tool. He touched a tree and the shadow spread from his hand down to Shiro, then to the other three ninjas. Sarada found her own opportunity and threw her opponent off her back. Lifting her glasses, she activated her sharingan, putting the opponent into a genjutsu. Mitsuki still needed help, but he stretched his arm out and punched his captor.

Freyja rode up, stopped her horse and jumped off. She pounded her sword on her shield. "Restrain the outlaws!" she ordered. "I'll go for the leader! TYR!" She led the charge of the farmhands.

Shiro let Konohamaru go and tried to run. But he was mostly motionless, and it gave Konohamaru the opening he needed to punch him, knocking him out. On Freyja's left-hand side, he ran in between the other ninjas towards Jiro. He drew his fist and punched him hard on the left cheek. Then Freyja bashed him with the metal dome in the middle of her shield.

"MITSUKI! NOW!"

Mitsuki reached out and wrapped his hand around Jiro's wrists. Konohamaru then pulled a rope out and finished the job on outlaw's wrist and ankles.

He sighed. But then he saw the shape Boruto was in. It wasn't pretty.

The farmhands dealt with the other ninjas, and they were soon all handled. But now they gathered around Boruto, who still lay on the ground on his stomach, writhing in agony.

"Boruto, are you alright?" Konohamaru asked.

"My back!" he strained.

"Can you move?"

Boruto tried, but screamed. "I can't-I can't feel my feet!"

"Don't move him!" Freyja shouted. "It is a back injury, I can tell. We cannot just move him."

"Then what are we gonna do!?" Sarada shouted.

"Get something we can carry him on," said Konohamaru. "Some of that wood?" He pointed at the remnants of the wood that the one ninja used.

"NO!" Freyja shouted. "That will not work!"

"Do you know what to do?" Sarada asked.

"I have seen spinal injuries from horse falls," she said. "This is similar." Boruto writhed in pain. "Don't move!"

"If it's a spinal injury, we're in trouble," said Konohamaru. "We don't have much time. Keep his neck in position. I'm going to send a flare." He stood up and took out a scroll from his pack. He raised his arm up and shot the scroll into the air. It exploded into a cloud of red dust.

Far away, a Konoha guard saw the flare and called for assistance.

Fifteen agonizing minutes passed. They were able to carefully get Boruto on his back and keep his neck steady without causing more pain. But the longer they had to wait, the scarier the situation became. Boruto still couldn't feel his feet. Konohamaru did his best to keep Boruto calm, and asked Sarada to help alleviate the pain he must have been in. But in the back of his mind, he feared for the boy's long-term prognosis. This could be a potentially-crippling injury if they didn't get treated and fast.

He was beyond relieved when the paramedics arrived. They stabilized Boruto and put him in a cart they brought with them. Freyja mounted her horse and rode in front, but kept enough distance so that the cart could go without her holding it back. The farmhands meanwhile, carried the four outlaw ninjas.

Soon they were at Konoha's gate, greeted by a crowd of onlookers and ninjas. The cart driver angrily growled. "MOVE IT!" he shouted, "WE HAVE AN INJURED GENIN!"

The crowd gasped. The ninjas struggled to break up the crowd, but they pushed against them. Sarada stepped forward and pushed some of the crowd out of the way, and Freyja helped, using her shield to do so, but apologized for doing so.

"MOVE IT!" Sarada shouted.

Another commotion started and quickly spread. No one liked what it sounded like, and they were right to not like it.

The Hokage was running up to them, accompanied by Shikamaru Nara. "What's going on here!? Everyone, get out of the way!" he shouted. He turned to look at the scene unfolding, and his eyes widened when he spotted Sarada at the front.

His face immediately turned pale. "Oh, no."

He rushed over to the cart and screamed when he saw Boruto laying in the cart bed, still restrained, and looking in absolute agony.

"BORUTO!"

"Lord Hokage, he's injured!" Konohamaru shouted, not to sound obvious, but to remind him that time was of utmost importance.

"Well, then get everyone moving!" he shouted, immediately getting the hint. "MY SON IS INJURED!"

"Dad?" Boruto weakly asked. This drew Naruto's attention.

"Hang on!" he said. "We're getting you to the hospital!"

On the side, two women, both early-middle aged, watched this intently. One of them was deeply concerned, the other was not. This other one clenched her fist and her jaw, as if trying not to speak out

of turn. However, the Hokage's concern for his son appeared to be grating on her, and she snapped.

"SO NOW YOU'RE WORRIED ABOUT *YOUR* SON!?" she shouted. The Hokage jumped up and spun around to look at her, then back to Boruto. "What about *my* son!? You sent him on a mission when he was 12 years old! And now he's dead! You're only concerned about children when they're yours! What happened to fixing the system!?"

"Don't speak to the Hokage like that!" one of the ninjas spat, raising a hand at her.

"WAIT!" Naruto held his hand up. The crowd gasped and fell silent. They could see that Naruto's eyes were still wide from shock, but there was a bit more there. Realization. "She's right. I've failed. But we have to get him to the hospital!"

"And when we get there, there's only one doctor I want working on my son; Sakura Uchiha!"

Okay, real sorry it took me so long to update the fic. The last couple of weeks have been super busy for me at home and at work, so I had a hard time getting the energy to write. I have been able to write other stuff, of course, but things don't always go as planned. I'm just glad I was able to finish this pivotal chapter, where we finally get an action scene! But what about Boruto!?

As much as I hate the next generation, I still have to be fair to everyone. And I'm also sorry for doing this Boruto. I also expect to get some angry reviews from people telling me that Boruto's stronger than this. Just remember, this is fanfiction. I'm taking a couple liberties here. I still appreciate the constructive comments. I don't appreciate it when someone flames me just because I get a couple things wrong. I don't claim to be an expert on everything Nardo/Burrito. Never have.

Still, I hope you enjoyed this! Please review!

Chapter 9

Everything hit Sakura fast.

She was working in her office, writing a report about a patient's rare form of cancer, engrossed in said report when her phone rang. She nearly jumped out of the chair. Taking a deep breath, she picked up the phone. "Yes?"

" *Doctor Uchiha, there's an incoming patient demanding to see you,*" said one of the receptionists.

"I'm busy," she said. "I'm working on a report right now." She looked back at the report. Genetic tests had shown the cancer to be rare, but treatable in itself, *but* it would take a considerable amount of chakra in order to treat it. She currently could not do it on her own, which she had tried to do, and it was difficult to operate on because of the tumor's location. However, she was eager to continue working on it. Other doctors might be able to assist in treatment options, but aside from the considerable amount of chakra needed to cure it mentioned earlier, she found that medium levels of chakra could turn it into a manageable disease until they found a way to fully treat it. But, as she'd discovered, it still took multiple doctors to keep up that chakra.

She leaned back in her chair, put her hands behind her head, looked up at the ceiling and sighed. She was still not even halfway through her shift, and she already felt fatigued. But she chuckled. She liked this fatigue. Even though it was long, and her legs ached, serving the people felt more rewarding than anything else she'd done. If only she wasn't so useless. And the head of medicine hadn't cut her hours.

He knew she was a war hero, yet he did it anyway. He knew that Naruto Uzumaki would be dead if it wasn't for her. And now she began to question her own uselessness-it had been bored into her not just by herself, but by people around her, both close and not very

close, to the point that she started to believe it-when she heard the PA announcement.

" Doctor Uchiha, please report to the emergency, room, Doctor Uchiha to the emergency room "

" Cancel Doctor Uchiha, " the chief of medicine's voice interjected.

She wrinkled her nose and scowled. If the chief of medicine didn't want her, then why did they call her? She picked up the phone and dialed a receptionist.

"Tell them I'm working on a report," she said.

" Doctor Uchiha, your daughter just ran in demanding to see you. "

Motherly instincts kicked in. "Is she hurt?"

" A little bit, but just a few bruises. No, she's talking about-"

" MOM, GET DOWN HERE, NOW! " Sarada shouted. *" The Hokage will be here any minute! "*

"The Hokage!?" This sounded serious. "I'll be right down. You stay there!"

" Well, duh! "

"And don't talk back to me!" She hung up the phone, grabbed her doctor's coat and hurried out of her office.

The sudden flurry of activity forced her to speed-walk, not run, downstairs. The Hokage didn't show up that often, and when he did, this kind of commotion was common. She just had to maneuver correctly, and even found herself falling into some old kunoichi habits, like that stupid bent-over run. The logic behind it was that it was supposed to be faster than regular running. Honestly, she never questioned it as a kid, since she was so used to it, now things were

different, and she could look at the past with a different lens. That lens would re-appear again later on, but right now, that was not her concern.

Out of habit and curiosity, she started speed-walking with that same ninja run. It actually was fast.

She was still feeling nonchalant when she got to the first floor, but that quickly changed. Down here, the activity was more intense and hurried. She wondered what was going on at first, but quickly got caught up in the hubbub. Now she ran, but caught herself rather quickly, going to a heavy jog instead of a sprint. She also started wondering what the hubbub was all about, but logically reasoned that it had something to do with the Hokage's presence and by extension, Sarada's deperate-sounding pleas.

Something big had happened.

It was confirmed upon arriving in the emergency room.

The patient was being carried in on a stretcher by several orderlies. Upon getting closer, she recognized the patient as Boruto. She almost gasped, especially at the sight of how much agony the boy was visibly in, but professionalism overrode those other emotions. "What do we have?" She asked.

"Patient was brought in on a cart," said one of the orderlies. "The people who brought him in tell us that he was kicked in the back and has a likely spinal injury."

"Get him to a bed," she ordered. Time was of the essence. She didn't know how long it had been between the injury and his arrival, but she had at least a 7-hour window to save the boy's spine. "MOVE IT!"

"Yes, ma'am!" The orderlies started wheeling him away, with her in tow.

That's when she saw the familiar orange, black and white of the Hokage's uniform in her left eye's peripheral vision. She also spotted the Chief of medicine, and the two were in a very heated argument that was loud enough for her to clearly hear.

"Lord Hogake, there are *many* other fine doctors here who can help your son," the Chief of Medicine said.

"I said I wanted Doctor Uchiha!" Naruto demanded.

"She's busy with a report!"

"That's never stopped her before! She knows her duty!"

"She won't be here tomorrow, anyway. We're letting out other doctors-"

"Then keep her here through tomorrow if you have to!"

"Lord Hokage, why are you so fixated on her? She let a patient die!"

"I wouldn't be her if she wasn't around! She saved my life way too many times to count!"

"Good for her, but-"

"And she's dedicated her life to serving the Village! Why are you trying to keep her from operating on my son like I asked!?"

"Because he hates the fact that I'm an Uchiha," she interrupted. The timing of his question could not have been any better, so she decided now was the perfect time to interrupt. Naruto was visibly elated to see her, but not the Chief of Medicine. In fact, he was visibly furious. That didn't matter to her.

"Don't you have a report to finish?"

"It will still be there," she answered. "Lord Hokage, I assure you that I can save Boruto."

"That's why I wanted you to do it," he said. "Now what's this about him hating that you're an Uchiha?"

"I talked to him earlier," she answered. "He didn't quite admit it, but it was close enough."

"What's the meaning of this!?"

"Sir, discrimination based on family name is illegal in Konoha," she said. "I know this because my foreclosure attorney said so."

"So that's it? That's why your hours have been cut?"

"Until I can prove it in court, I believe it is," she answered.

Naruto turned and glared at the Chief of Medicine, who shrank from said glare. Gathering himself, the CoM took on the appearance of a man in control of the situation, standing up straight and putting his arms at the front. "Lord Hokage," he said, "I am simply acting out the wishes of the hospital's board of directors, who were concerned that Doctor Uchiha's last name would frighten patients who still harbor awful memories of the Uchiha clan."

"I don't like th Uchiha clan, either," said Naruto. "But Doctor Uchiha's record speaks for itself, believe it!

"Besides, this is a state-run hospital. I don't need to worry about the Board!"

"Lord Hokage, that's not necessary," Sakura interjected, pulling on his arm. Naruto momentarily stared at her, then nodded. "Sir, if I can successfully save the Hokage's son, PLEASE consider giving me my full-time status back."

The CoM looked visibly uncomfortable, despite raising his chin to look down his nose at Sakura.

"Sir, which would be worse; a doctor with a name who's just slightly uncomfortable, or the Hokage's son being crippled because the best

doctor wasn't allowed to treat him?" Sakura asked. "Imagine the headlines."

"*And* the lawsuits," added Naruto. "And what if she sues you for discrimination?"

"How could you stand by her?" The CoM asked. "She's useless!"

"We were teammates!" Naruto snapped.

"How could you go by his word?" The CoM ask Sakura.

"What he said," she replied. "Naruto could be a blockhead, idiot and pervert, but in the end, he was the best teammate I ever had. He'd do whatever it took, and he didn't abandon his friends." That made Naruto squirm, but he kept his composure.

The CoM tried to do the same, but he was obviously beaten. He sighed. "Go and treat the Hokage's son," he said. "I'll consider your case."

"SHAAANNARO!" Sakura cheered, pumping her fist and turning to hi-five the Hokage.

"I know you can do it!" He said, giving her his familiar toothy grin and a thumbs-up. "Believe it!"

"I promise that I'll heal him!" She said. "It's the promise of a lifetime!"

She turned around to leave, and Naruto watched her depart with a wistful, almost loving expression. But he didn't notice the recently-arrived Hinata watching from afar again, and she could see his face. And she was devastated.

The bright light shining in Boruto's eyes from above did more to disorient him than the painkilling drugs. Nurses walk around him. They removed his clothes and put him in a hospital gown, and then

hooked him up to a few machines. The rhythmic beeping was lulling him to sleep, but not in a good way. The nurses all tried to keep him awake. And despite the painkillers, his back was in incredible agony, and so was his stomach. He thought he was strong, but Jiro had obviously done a big number on him. The fact that he'd managed to do that scared him just as much as the current situation he was in.

He couldn't move. He was still strapped down on the gurney, his head kept in place by a collar or something. He didn't know what to call it. But he felt hopelessly trapped in his own body, even as he tried to move his fingers. He heard a nurse make a pleased sound. Apparently something was going on.

He heard the door opening. He would have looked up if it hadn't been for that collar keeping him from moving. The sorta-familiar scent of cherry blossoms filled the room, accompanied by the sound of footsteps approaching him. He looked to his right and saw a shadowy figure looming over him. But he could feel the person gently, but firmly holding his hand. He felt the tears bubbling over. He wanted to cry. "Mom?"

"Your mom's outside," said the soothing voice. It definitely wasn't his mom.

"Mrs. Uchiha?"

He faintly saw the doctor smiling at him. He already felt deeply at ease in her presence. "How are you feeling, Boruto?"

"It hurts, Mrs. Uchiha."

"You can call me Sakura for now," she said. "On a scale of one to ten, how much pain are you in?"

"Ten."

"I see." Sakura became concerned, but kept her soothing presence. "We'll take good care of you, okay, Boruto?"

"Okay," he choked. Strangely enough, it reminded him of when he was sick as a younger kid and his actual mom was there to take care of him.

"What's the patient's status?" she asked.

"Patient can move his fingers," a nurse answered.

"Can you move your feet?" she asked.

"I can't feel them."

Again, Sakura was concerned. "Have you run any diagnostic tests yet?"

"Not yet. We're still trying to keep the patient stable. He already received two doses of painkillers."

"If what I'm hearing is correct, we're going to have to move quickly," she said. She momentarily walked away from him, causing him to shout,

"Mom-Mrs. Uchiha?"

"I'm not your mom, silly," Sakura chuckled. "But don't worry. Your dad trusts me to take care of you. He's really worried about you, y'know."

"Of course," she answered. "He loves you."

Boruto felt like he needed to cry again, and he did. The nurses all looked at her, but she brushed them off.

"It says here you were also kicked in the midsection," she continued. "I'm going to run a couple more tests to see if there's another injury I'm suspecting. I'm going to put my hands on your sides, and I'm going to need you to breathe for me, okay?"

"Okay."

Sakura put her hands on Boruto's sides and watched him take several deep breaths. The actions caused a sharp pain on both sides, and he struggled to breathe in some places.

"I'm going to use my chakra to see the patient's injuries," she said. She made a hand sign, making her hands glow green. She also leaned down to listen to Boruto's inner organs. He waited for what seemed like an eternity before she lifted her head up. Then she ran her hands along his body. Her hands were steady and stayed away from his private areas, and she occasionally gently squeezed his hand, which helped to calm him down. "Almost done, sweetie," she said soothingly.

She finally finished. Her hands stopped glowing green and she turned to one of the nurses. "Patient has fractured 9th and 10th ribs on both sides, plus some minor internal hemorrhaging that has already begun to clot. We'll have to remove some of that blood."

"What about the back?"

"I'm going to need help turning him over," she said. She gestured to the other nurses. Together, while keeping Boruto steady, they turned him over onto his stomach and into a position that didn't cause pain or make it hard for him to breathe. Again, he could feel Sakura's hands gently gliding over his back, while still keeping him calm. He felt her remove her hands.

"Just as I feared," she said. "Patient has multiple fractures in the thoracic spine, and some spinal cord damage."

Boruto felt his chest clutch. "W-what does that mean!?"

"Well, it means that unless we move quickly, you're going to live the rest of your life paralyzed from the waist down," she answered. "But don't worry, we're gonna get you back on your feet." Then she spoke to the other nurses. "Wheel him to the CRI room, please. Then prep him for surgery."

The atmosphere in the waiting room was bleak. Despite putting on an optimistic appearance earlier, Naruto sat despondently in one of the chairs, stuffing his face in his hands, despite how uncomfortable the bandages rubbed against his face. No one could deny that he didn't have a reason to feel this way; this was his son, and it was also evident that he was feeling guilty. That middle-aged mother's comment about her genin son seemed to have struck a nerve with him.

Most of Team Konohamaru did not look as despondent as the Hokage did, although that didn't mean that they weren't. Konohamaru himself was arguably the most despondent. He had blamed himself for Boruto's state, which Mitsuki disagreed with. Mitsuki himself was just as despondent, although he thought that Sarada was hurt the most, although she was clearly not acting like it was affecting her. She repeatedly voiced her opinion that Sakura would take care of Boruto, but it was with a shaky voice.

"My mom's not a weakling!" she said in that same shaky voice. "Y-you'll see!"

Himawari was also there, and she begged to know what was wrong with her big brother. She was crying, very loudly, although she thankfully didn't interrupt anyone else. In fact, everyone was grateful that she was able to cry.

But Naruto was still beside himself in grief, sitting next to Hinata. She tried to comfort him, but her efforts fell flat each time. As much as he wanted this to be the spark the marriage needed to keep it going, concern for Boruto necessarily overrode that. And as much as he appreciated her efforts, they didn't have the effect neither she nor he wanted. The obvious reason for this was because Boruto's life-or at least his ability to walk-hung in the balance.

Finally, Dr. Uchiha walked into the waiting room. Naruto was clearly eager to see her, for he jumped up at the sight of her. "PLEASE tell me he'll be okay!"

"We're working on that," she said. "He's not going to die, don't worry." The room breathed a collective sigh. "But, he has several fractures in his spine and ribs. The ribs will be fine. Those will heal on their own. But we have to get some CRIs and then perform surgery on him."

"Surgery!?"

"I could see that his vertebrae were in bad shape," she continued. "That kick to his back dislodged and broke them, so we'll have to go in. As for his spinal cord, we can't operate on that, but it can be healed with the right dose of chakra. Fixing his vertebrae is the priority right now, though."

"What does CRI stand for?" Hinata asked.

"Chakra Resonance Imaging," Sakura answered. "The machine uses our chakra to get a better look than just waving your chakra-infused hand all over the body."

"Thank you, Dr. Uchiha," said Naruto. "I have full confidence in you. Believe it!" He gave her a thumbs-up that she returned. Then she walked away.

But Hinata jealously watched. He rarely, if ever, said "believe it" to her. She'd fallen for him in part because of that. Now he was using it in front of another woman.

A couple thoughts came to her. First, was he cheating on her? That was obviously not the case, since she knew that he didn't go out very much over the last couple of weeks, and he wouldn't have made this therapy appointment if he was trying to hide something.

The other thought was one that had hounded her ever since they were kids. She knew that he had a crush on Sakura, which she was glad that he finally realized was only because of his rivalry with Sasuke. But was it really? She could see that his expression was the

exact same that he'd had when he looked at Sakura when they were younger.

She denied it, of course. He was only glad that his son- *their* son- would be okay, and his best friend, whom he had an unshakeable bond with, would be the one saving him.

Hinata cursed herself. She didn't think that being selfish about Naruto was so bad. Love was selfish and selfless in its own way, as her father had told her once before. She selflessly wanted Naruto to be happy, but selfishly wanted him to be happy with her.

Things still got rather upsetting for her, so she stood up and walked out of the room. Seeing this, Naruto followed her. The rest of Team Konohamaru was about to follow them, but Konohamaru put his hand up to keep them in place.

He followed her into a little nook away from the waiting room. They stood across from each other in the hallway. Playing with her hair, Hinata looked for something to say to her husband. He stood quietly. She almost wilted under his inquisitive gaze, but regathered herself.

"Are you alright?" he asked. It was a stupid question in a way, given how he saw that she was trying to deny that their marriage was not built on something positive.

"Of course," she said.

"Our son is in trouble," said Naruto. "It's all my fault."

"It's not your fault."

"Yes, it is!" he scoffed. "I promised to change the Ninja System! Now I see that nothing's really changed. I was lying to myself."

"No, you weren't."

"Easy for you to say. The Hyuuga benefited from the system, didn't they?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I don't know! I'm just so FRUSTRATED now! And that middle-aged woman asked me why I'm worried about Boruto, but her son died on a mission! I'm a failure!"

"No, you're not."

"Yes, I am. I've done nothing. I've just been a puppet of the Daimyo, the Council and the powerful clans. I'm lying to myself."

"Where did you get this?"

"I said I don't know," he answered. "I mean, you already know this, but I just feel, so... tired! And it started ever since I married you. Okay, not quite."

"Naruto, you've done nothing wrong," she said.

"Please stop saying that," he said. "I just had a woman yell at me."

"You're not in the right mindset."

"I know. But I've been thinking about what the counsellor said. I think I'm starting to agree with him."

"You can't be serious."

"I don't know if I am."

"Naruto... remember that I was there for you when we were kids. Remember how we used to play together?"

"Yeah, I remember. But why did it take a genjutsu for me to remember? And why are you bringing this up?"

"... You're guilt-tripping me!"

"What!?"

"Don't play with me!" he shouted. "I know you don't mean to do it, but you're guilt-tripping me into staying with you! The counsellor was right! This marriage is a sham! And I bought into it just so I could get in with the Hyuuga and become Hokage-oh *GODS*, I'm scum!"

"Where did this come from?"

"I... don't... know!" he breathed. "My mouth is acting faster than my brain at this point."

" Nah, you've felt this way for a long time, " Kurama interjected.

Where have you been?

" I've been watching this sham marriage implode. It's entertaining!"

I thought we were friends now!

" I get easily bored. Oh, your fake wife is asking you something. "

"Naruto? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he answered. "Just talking to Kurama."

"Naruto, why did you say 'Believe it' to Sakura? I don't remember the last time you said that to me."

"I think I have recently," he said. He tried to think. And he couldn't remember.

"Naruto, *I'm* your wife. I don't want you talking to Mrs. Uchiha except on official business."

"Where is this coming from?"

"I heard from Mrs. Kagawa that you skipped out of your office to go to Dr. Uchiha's house. Why?"

Mrs. Kagawa was the old lady who saw Naruto way back when he found out Sakura was having financial trouble, and he went to go check up on her. He froze, his chest clenching up. Then he relaxed. "Dr. Uchiha's running into financial trouble," he said. "She's facing foreclosure. I wanted to help her."

"Why?"

"Because she's my oldest friend!" he answered. "We went through so much together! We grew up together, we bonded, we shared each other's secrets! I wanted her to treat Boruto because I know that she can do it! I know she's a great Medical ninja, she surpassed her master! Unlike me, who's probably let Jiraiya-sensei down. I can't even watch the *Gutsy Ninja* drama."

"I just wanted to help her."

"... You're still in love with her."

"What?"

"PLEASE tell me you're still not in love with her!"

"I'm not! I only loved her because of my rivalry with Sasuke! I knew she'd be happy with him, but... she deserves so much more than the hand she's been dealt in life."

"Okay, maybe I still do love her. But we grew up together. It's not hard to love her."

"I understand," Hinata whispered. "But still, I need you to-"

"Need me to what!? You just tried to get me to stop seeing my best friend! You know what? That's another thing the counsellor was right about. You ARE a parasite. It's all about YOU, not me!"

"That's not true! I'm happy, why can't you be happy!?"

"Because I realize that I had to change myself in order to please you! I know people change! But I've changed to such an extent that I don't recognize myself anymore!" *Kurama, are you doing this?*

" *Did you already forget what I said earlier?* "

You're not helping!

" *Nah, this is all you.* "

In a way, Kurama was right, because the next words that poured out of his mouth came directly from his subconscious. "I always thought you were some weird girl. I didn't expect to marry you, and I didn't want to marry you then. I KNOW things change in life, but... maybe I would've been better off marrying someone like Ino instead. I'm not cheating with her, she and Sai are happily married."

"Naruto, what are you saying?"

Naruto sighed and rubbed his forehead. He thought about it. And the more he thought, the more he came to the same conclusion. Even if he didn't want to say it out loud, his subconscious and Kurama both egged him on to say *that* word.

"I can't do this anymore," he admitted. "I think we need to get divorced."

Hinata dropped her hands, turned away from him and walked away. He silently watched her walk away. And when he saw her leave, he spotted Sakura standing in the hallway entrance.

"What happened here?" she asked.

"Nothing," he said. "Please, just... I'm scum. I let the Ninja System continue, and it's all my fault Boruto's this way. How and where did everything go wrong for me?"

"You're definitely scum for letting the system continue," she said. "But it's still not your fault. At least not directly."

"What should I do?"

"That's not something I should be answering," she said. "That's something you need to figure out yourself. But I know you can do what needs to be done. You got where you are now, after all. There's no reason you can't change the world like you promised. Believe it!" She grinned and flashed a thumbs-up. Naruto couldn't help but smile, and also gave the thumbs-up.

As for Hinata, she listened close by, and now she could no longer deny that her marriage was a sham. He could never love her as much as he loved Sakura.

And so she cried.

So how was that?

I got emotional in a couple places, like the part where Sakura comforts Boruto. I got tears in my eyes writing it. As for everything else, I admit that Naruto's rant was a little unstructured, but sometimes we'll have real rants where we don't know where we're going. And yeah, I've anticipated this chapter for a long time, too.

Now, I want to address a few reviews. I've gotten a couple of them nitpicking the stuff I portrayed. I admit that I could do a lot better with canon depictions of the characters and their fighting styles, but if your review comes off as nitpicky-AFTER I admitted that I'm no expert on everything Nardo/Burrito-then I'm sorry, but you're blocked, since you're not giving ANY constructive criticism. Besides I already made clear WHY Sakura got her hours cut, and it's because the CoM is a bigot who doesn't care what she's done.

Also, I have to address ANOTHER bad ff-dot-net review, this one by a guest that reads, "YOU REALLY NEED TO MOVE ON, MUST BE BAD FOR YOUR HEALTH TO BE THIS SALTY ABOUT THE END OF AN ANIME"

And from another guest, "Narusaku stans need to get a fucking life, being salty after 3 years is pathetic.

Also, sakura was a bitch to naruto, almost abusive. Legit dont understand how can anyone ship that"

BITCH, I'M NOT THE ONE POSTING ANONYMOUS TROLL REVIEWS ON SOMEONE ELSE'S FIC. GODDAMN, and people think anti-enders are salty. Dude, it's FANFICTION. If you don't like it, DON'T FUCKING READ. It must be toxic/hazardous for *your* health if you let someone else's fic rustle your jimmies.

Also, PLEASE STOP SAYING "PLEASE CONTINUE" IN YOUR REVIEWS. IT'S RUDE. I HAVE A LIFE. I WRITE THIS JUST AS MUCH FOR MYSELF AS I DO FOR YOU. But like I said, I get busy and sometimes I'm too tired to write. For fuck's sake, I'm not your fucking writing servant. And if that's all you say, how am I supposed to know what you liked or didn't like? Please, tell me what you liked or didn't like in a constructive manner, and I'll be sure to address it.

I'm sorry if I seem rude. It's just that people telling me what they liked about the chapter feeds my ego and really does make me want to continue more than someone saying those words.

OH, and if you're going to send me a big block of text, please use commas, period, and other punctuation characters, because it's hard to read a big block of text with none of those. It just makes you look like a bad writer when you do that. /rant over

Please tell me how I did!

Chapter 10

The flurry of activity surrounding him confused Boruto.

The painkilling drugs they'd already injected him with were taking effect, making his thoughts feel fuzzy. He didn't know where he was being taken, although he did hear the word "CRI". He didn't know what that meant. He would soon find out. As an orderly wheeled his gurney down the hallway, he looked out of the right corner of his eye and the room he was going to, and could barely make out the words "CHAKRA RESONANCE IMAGING" on the sign next to the door. He didn't know what it meant.

"What's that?" he asked weakly.

"We're just going to get a better look inside you," the orderly answered kindly and gently. "This machine will use chakra to make an image of your insides so-okay, I don't mean to gross you out. What I'm saying is, we're hoping to get a better look at your spine."

"I'm scared," he said.

"It's okay," said the orderly. "It's alright to be scared. But you have nothing to worry about."

They wheeled him into a room where he could see a large, circular machine and a shelf jutting out of it. The orderlies stopped in front of the shelf. They removed the IVs from his arm, then carefully put him onto the shelf. As earlier, he stared up at the ceiling, unable to move his neck or back to see what was going on. And he was still scared. The orderly gripped his hands and gave him a comforting smile, which helped him relax just a little before he felt himself moving into the big, circular machine.

Naruto was banging his head on the wall. Lightly banging, not pounding, more like tapping his head on the wall. Only a quarter of an hour had passed since he told Hinata he wanted a divorce, and after thinking about it, he didn't regret his decision to do so. However, he was furious with himself that he'd yelled at her, letting the heat of the moment get to him. He thought about her shocked reaction, remembering that aside from Hanabi's teasing, and Boruto's bratty behavior, she'd rarely gotten grief from anyone close to her. He did like her, but he didn't love her, and he'd let this joke of a marriage go on for far too long. He didn't even recognize himself, because he'd lied for so long. *I hate people who lie to themselves!* rung out in his head again.

Except this time it was at himself.

" *Are you done feeling sorry for yourself?* " Kurama asked.

Are you going to help me out or are you going to just sit there?

" *This is like one of those awful dramas middle-aged housewives devour like I devour my enemies.* "

So you're saying you're not helping?

" *Yep!* "

Look, just be honest, am I doing the right thing divorcing her?

Kurama sighed. " *Okay, fine. Yes, you're doing the right thing. You said it yourself, this joke of a marriage has gone on for too long.* "

Gee, thanks.

" *Yes, but it's also your fault for jumping right in.* "

Oh, come on! Now what am I gonna do?

" *I dunno. Like Sakura said, this is your problem. You have to fix it yourself. Oh. Look alive, your advisor's coming.* "

Shikamaru approached the Hokage slowly. He must have been uneasy to do so, knowing the Hokage's heightened emotional state at the moment, and the fact that he was tapping his head on the wall. But the opportunity to make a very bad joke could not be passed up. "Do you need to get ahead of your work, sir?"

Naruto's eyes narrowed and he turned to glare at Shikamaru. Shikamaru did not regret it one bit. However, he could also see that Naruto was under great duress, and not just because of his son's injury.

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

"I just yelled at my wife," he said. "And I'm divorcing her. I don't regret the divorce decision, but I lost my cool."

"Wait, *divorce* !?" Shikamaru sputtered. "Are you crazy!? What will the tabloids thing!? And what about Lord Hyuuga!?"

Hiashi. Dammit. Naruto banged his head on the wall again. "I had to do it," he said. We went to the marriage counsellor today. He said that our marriage is a joke and her presence was parasitic on me. And I resented her for drawing me into this thing."

" *See? You knew it was bad the whole time.* "

What are you trying to prove?

"Lord Hokage?"

Naruto had forgotten that no one can hear his inner conversations with Kurama. He sucked his breath in and leaned away from the wall. He turned to Shikamaru.

"Like I said. I'm getting a divorce. I shouldn't have married Hinata in the first place, and now I have to fix this mess I'm in. I'll have to start by reconciling with Boruto."

"That's a great idea," Shikamaru replied. "I'm sure he'll love hearing that you're divorcing his mother the day he almost died."

Naruto groaned again. "Agh, what was I thinking!? I should've thought this through! You're not helping!"

"You told me you were doing this," Shikamaru answered. "I'm just bringing you back to reality."

"It doesn't change a thing," he said. "I'm going to divorce her. I can't live this lie anymore. And it's my fault that my son could be crippled. I should have changed the ninja system earlier."

"Is it because of that woman earlier?"

Naruto nodded.

Shikamaru could see that Naruto was racked with guilt. He also wanted to talk him out of making such a decision in the midst of a highly emotional moment, but he also knew that Naruto was supposedly prophesized to change the world. And although he saw no reason to change the system right now, this clearly meant a lot to Naruto. That, arguably, was more important than being a Chosen One for the Hokage, the Daimyo and the Elder Council be damned. It would be an abdication of his duties if he tried to stop him.

"Where do we start?" he asked.

"I'll inform the Daimyo that we're going to raise the minimum age for recruitment," Naruto answered. "At least that's one thing I'm thinking of. I think that's why we're so screwed up. We were just kids forced to fight for an awful system."

Shikamaru had to concede that Naruto had a point.

The CRI machine made a lot of noise that unnerved Boruto until he got used to it and it almost lulled him to sleep with its rhythmic

banging. He didn't know how long he was in the machine, just that it felt like a long time had passed from when he went into the machine, and then came out. The orderlies were still there. They carefully lifted him off the CRI bed and back onto the stretcher. Then they wheeled him out of the room.

He had already tired of the dull, boring, bland, grey ceiling panels that passed him by whenever they wheeled him around the hospital. Being physically restrained from moving his neck didn't help at all. He was already tiring of the hospital, but he knew that he was likely to stay here at least for a couple of days before finally being released. His heart sank. That meant preparing for the Chunin Exams was out of the question. He would likely have to wait until next year, when he was 13, to get the chance. And training with Sasuke was supposed to help.

So much for the prodigal son of the Hokage. His ninja career was over before it again.

He started sniffing, trying to stop himself from crying, but an orderly wiped his tears away. "Why are you crying?" She softly asked.

"I don't wanna talk about it," he answered. She was just an orderly. He didn't know her. He didn't feel comfortable showing this to anyone but his mom, and she probably wasn't allowed to see him right now. Everything was just a typhoon of activity, and he was trapped in his own body, unable to have his say in the matter. He'd never felt more helpless in his entire life. And that also made him want to cry, but he resisted the temptation to cry.

Before long, he found himself in another part of the hospital, behind a three-sided curtain. The nurses and orderlies hooked him up to more machines. He was used to the painful pinching that came with the injections. Now he just wanted to get things over with before he could cry again.

The lights weren't too bright this time. He found it easier to look up at the ceiling here than in the ICU or the CRI room. Still, he kept

looking away from them because looking at them for too long hurt his eyes. They made him tear up even more.

The familiar cherry blossom scent hit his nose again and he looked to his right to see Dr. Uchiha walking towards him, a sight for sore eyes.

"How are we feeling, Boruto?" She asked in that kind, maternal, professional way.

"It hurts," he said weakly.

"Well, we'll do our best to change that," she said. "So what are the results of the CRI?"

"Patient's T6-T11 vertebrae are severely fractured," said the nurse. Sakura frowned.

"What does that mean?" Boruto asked.

"It just confirmed what I feared the most," said Sakura. "It means that we're going to need some help in your surgery, because I could potentially use a lot of chakra to heal the damage. And that if we don't act fast, your ninja career will be over before it even began."

Boruto felt his chest clench.

"But don't worry. We'll take care of you." She smiled at him again, that motherly smile she perfected on Sarada all her life, and clutched his hand.

It made him sniffle.

"Are you crying?"

"I'm not crying!"

"You can cry."

And so he did.

She held his hand the whole time, patiently waiting for him to calm down, until he cried himself out. Then she turned to the other orderlies. "Let's get him under."

"Under?"

"We're gonna help you go to sleep to make this easier. Don't worry, sweetie. You've been very brave all day."

Boruto could just barely nod. A mask was the next thing he saw. He watched it descend to his face, and then the feeling of it covering his mouth and nose. An orderly strapped it to his face. Sakura stayed close to him, holding his hand and smiling warmly. It did the trick. He looked to his left and saw the doctors turning the gas on.

"Where are my mom and dad?" he choked.

"They're still here," Sakura answered. "Now, I'm going to need you to count backwards from 100. Ready? One hundred... Ninety-nine... ninety-eight... ninety-sev..." The gas took effect, instantly knocking Boruto out.

The first thing Naruto did after talking to Shikamaru was to find his soon-to-be former wife, but it took a while looking around the hospital before he finally found her. He located her in a quiet waiting room near the surgery room, knitting. She was lost in her own little world again. He knew this to be the case, because he loudly knocked on the door, but she didn't look up from her work. So he walked right up to her and firmly gripped her shoulder. She ignored him. Guilt immediately struck. "Listen," he said, "I'm sorry for how I acted earlier. I let my emotions get the best of me. I shouldn't have yelled at you like that, especially not when our son is in such bad shape.

"But... I still think we need to divorce. The counsellor said it himself, this marriage is a joke. We both know it. It's best that we end it

sooner, rather than later. We don't have to tell Boruto right now, but we'll have to tell him. In the meantime, please listen.

"Yes, you're selfish. But I agreed to this marriage, too. Yes, you deceived and guilt-tripped me, but I enabled it. I'm just as much to blame for it. And I hate myself because I went along with it. I mean, I've hated myself for a long time, but didn't want to admit it, because it would mean that I was admitting that I was a horrible person. I've been a horrible person, but now I want to make things right with everyone. I know divorcing you right now is wrong, but as I said, we have to do it.

"Besides, I know for certain you never loved me, either. You only loved the idea of me. You idolized me. It was obvious when you tried to save my life but almost got killed by Pein. It was obvious when you tried to save me and Neji died trying to save you. And it was obvious when we went on that mission to save your sister. It was obvious right from the beginning. Yes, I resent you, because marrying you was a terrible decision, and we obviously weren't right for each other. But in turn, I also deprived you of your chance to grow up and let go of me.

"I do know what love is. Love is important to me. Love has saved my life more than I can count. Love is why I've risked my life to save people. I love the village, but I know it's broken, and that's why I wanted to become Hokage, so I could make it a place to love. And for a time I did love you. But we have to admit, we were not a good fit for each other."

He could see her hands shaking. A single tear dropped from her eyes. "I don't know where I'm going with this. But I needed to get it out, just like I needed to vent earlier. And I'm genuinely sorry for yelling at you. You had and have a lot of potential. I saw it when you fought Neji in the chunin exams. But you let yourself be consumed by your obsession of me. I can't let you do that anymore. And I don't think Neji would like it if he saw what you've become. He'd also hate what I've become.

"I've taken my resentment of you out on Boruto and on other people. I can't even look at people the same way again because of it. Those dreams I have are because I hate myself, and I know that I let everyone down. I'm scum. I'm worse than scum. I don't want to be scum anymore. I want to make things better. I want to fulfill what I was meant to do. I want to change the world! I'm the Hokage, and I can finally bring real peace! Believe it!"

The dam holding Hinata's tears shattered and she doubled over in her chair. She loudly cried, a primal, ugly crying that went on for several minutes. Naruto didn't move. He stood by, still holding her shoulder, and letting her cry. He hated seeing or hearing her cry, but he correctly deduced that this was something she needed to do, and it would genuinely sort itself out when she finished. Soon the tears came to his eyes, and he cried as well. He didn't cry as much as Hinata though, because he was already spent from worrying about Boruto. He'd already had enough emotion for one day.

And yet he felt a great weight being lifted off his shoulders, and he stood up straight. He realized that although it was the end of a marriage, it was also the beginning of something new. He had another chance to fix as many things that had gone wrong as he could.

Eventually her bawling subsided, first going from sorrowful wails, to sobs to hiccups before she finally cried herself out. She looked up at him and she was in terrible shape. But she smiled at him and nodded.

"I can't lie to myself anymore," she said. "You're right. We can't let this go on. You never loved me, and I lied to myself that you did. I'm sorry if I ruined your life, and I forgive you for everything. But..."

"Boruto, I know," he interjected. "We'll have to take care of that, I know. But like I said, it's best that we not tell him just yet, not while he's recovering from this injury. And we need to find a time to actually do it, y'know?"

Hinata nodded.

"But first, let's go see how our son's doing."

"Okay."

He took her hand and led her out of the room. For all intents and purposes, until they could safely announce their divorce, they would play the village patriarch and matriarch, staying strong and stoic in the face of great struggle. It was an act worthy of a *noh* play. Even their expressions were masks worthy of such a play. Naruto could hear the low, monotonous, lamenting and almost mournful singing of the *jiutai* about the Hokage and his wife showing such fortitude in the face of great personal tragedy, but he knew that it was a role just like the actors portrayed. But this time, Naruto and Hinata were the actors, the hallways were the stage and the doctors and nurses stepping aside for them to let them pass were the enraptured audience. It was no different from his life up until now; the Hokage and his wife, running the village side-by-side, and not letting anyone see behind the wooden, years-old masks they wore.

This play continued until they reached the surgery room, where the operation was about to begin. Sakura Uchiha faced away from them, holding her gloved hands in front of her while nurses and orderlies busied themselves, preparing Boruto for the operation. She was sweating, not only because the bright lights made her hotter, but because doubt had already started to creep in. She hadn't performed such an extensive surgery in a long time. Would she be able to perform at her best? Or would her constant worrying about her uselessness get to her again? She took several deep breaths to calm down. She regularly used meditation techniques that Tsunade taught her to prepare herself for such a big moment.

But when she looked around and saw Naruto through the viewing window that students usually used, she felt much more at ease. She was also relieved, albeit temporarily, to see him with Hinata. He was smiling and giving her a thumbs-up.

Himawari joined her parents first, followed by the rest of Team Konohamaru and Ryu and Freyja. Sarada also gave her mother the thumbs-up, which Sakura heartily accepted. The play temporarily stopped so Naruto and Hinata could greet Ryu and Freyja.

"I am so sorry we couldn't do enough to help Boruto!" Freyja lamented. Ryu was satisfied, but only partially.

"Freyja! In front of the Hokage!?"

Freyja paused before her expression lit up with the obvious realization, and she bowed so low, she could touch her toes. Naruto sheepishly gestured her that it was unnecessary.

"Please," he said, "You already saved Boruto from far worse. There's no need to apologize! I'm the one who should apologize."

"Is this about the child soldiers thing?" Freyja asked.

"I don't know," Ryu shrugged.

An orderly interrupted the conversation when they gently tapped on the glass. "Could all of you please leave for now?" The orderly asked. "This will take a while."

"Very well, then," Naruto replied, putting up the stoic Hokage mask again. Everyone turned to depart, and Naruto got a look at Sakura beginning the operation. He would never know what prompted him to consider it, but getting a look at the medical equipment in use gave him an idea.

Mitsuki was the last person to leave, but Naruto was able to get his attention. "Mitsuki," he said, "Do you know where Orochimaru is?"

Sakura herself was relieved to see the group leaving, because she was honestly starting to feel distracted. So seeing them leave gave her the breathing room she needed. And now she looked down at Boruto's back, marked with the incision points they'd made as he'd

gone under. They'd been careful to flip him over onto his stomach, since his spine's precarious shape made it difficult for them to move him at all without worsening it. But now, everything was in working order, and they could finally begin.

"Alright," she announced. "Let's begin." She activated some chakra scalpels and went straight to work.

Several hours passed, but felt much longer for the group in the waiting room. The day's flurry of activity tuckered mostly everyone out, except for the Hokage, because he was engrossed in conversation with Freyja, discussing what she knew about Fjordland's military. She too had been a warrior, but only for a local militia. Still, the conversation gave Naruto some important ideas that he could float to the Daimyo. Whether he could implement any of these changes was still up in the air, but he appreciated her input. She wouldn't be the only person, of course. He would have to get the public behind it, and they wouldn't like it if the Hokage only listened to some foreigner and just decided to change everything.

The mood was interrupted when they heard familiar footsteps approaching. Everyone woke up, or came back to awareness, as Sakura walked into the waiting room with her head held high, and a smile on her lips.

"Boruto will be just fine."

End chapter

Okay, so how was this?

I REALLY appreciate all the feedback you guys gave me, for the last chapter, especially since there was so much feedback, I was nearly overwhelmed, and I'm glad it was also overwhelmingly positive. However, there were some things you guys pointed out that I had to take into consideration.

First off, Naruto telling Hinata they're getting divorced. It's still happening, guys. I just had to recognize that since I went way too hard on Hinata, I had to adjust this chapter because, well, Naruto's at fault, too. And that's what Naruto's whole monologue was about. It's also why I'm delaying the actual divorce, because you don't announce that right when your son is recovering from back surgery.

Second, I keep getting comments telling me Sakura's not useless. I agree wholeheartedly. But, Sakura's calling herself useless, in this story. All of that's in her head, even if it's wrong, and she keeps telling herself that. I wanted to clear this up. That being said, there's still a lot of development in store for her.

And one last thing. I got another suicide bait message from an AO3 user calling themselves "g.o.d" that read, "Kill yourself, fucked up virgin". Dude, seriously? Luckily, I already marked it as spam in AO3, but this guy seriously needs to get a fuckin' life.

One more thing, I KNOW WHAT NOH THEATER IS. I KNOW WHY THEY USE THE MASKS. NOH USES SUBTLE GESTURES TO CONVEY EMOTION. BUT IT'S A FUCKIN' METAPHOR FOR THE ACT NARUTO'S HAD TO PUT ON, AND IS ALSO A COMMENTARY ON JAPANESE STOICISM IN THE FACE OF GREAT TRAGEDY... Sorry. I just had to get that out first. So please don't try to splain Noh theater to me. I know (ba-dum, tss!) What I'm talking about.

Anyways, I hope you guys liked this chapter! Even if it was shorter than the last two...

Chapter 11

Boruto took a while to wake up from the anesthesia. The first sensation he felt was that he couldn't move, although he was already a bit used to that. As his eyes slowly opened, he figured out that it was because his back was still stiff, and he could still feel the collar around his neck, although just barely. Then he figured out that he wasn't wearing the neck brace at all, because he could feel the gentle breeze on his neck. One thing hadn't changed however, and that was the aforementioned back. But this new revelation was encouraging.

Consciousness drifted back in more ways than one. Not only was he waking up, but he could feel his feet—he could feel his feet! His eyes flew open. He quickly realized that he was sitting up in the bed, in a hospital room, and the window was open. But he was still tired, probably a side-effect or whatchamacallit from the anesthesia they put him under. He tried to sit up further, but found that not only was his back still stiff, it hurt a lot, causing him to yelp.

A nurse waiting outside his room heard the yelp and walked in. "Good morning, Boruto. Or should I say 'good evening'? You'll be happy to know that your surgery was a success!"

"Thanks," Boruto groaned.

Then another feeling struck, this time coming from the pit of his stomach. All color flushed from his face. The nurse spotted this, hurriedly grabbed a pan and ran over to his bedside just in time for him to empty his stomach's contents into the pan, much to his displeasure.

"Ewww!"

"Ugh, yeah. That's never a pleasant thing to wake up to, is it?" she asked. Boruto shook his head. He looked away so he wouldn't have

to see the nurse dump his vomit in the toilet. He noticed that it was night time, which contrasted with how bright his room was at the moment.

"What time is it?"

The nurse checked her watch. "Oh, about 5 'til the rat hour."

"Rat hour?"

"Your surgery was a bit long, but Dr. Uchiha has performed this surgery many times. We had to fuse your vertebrae back together and infuse some healing chakra. I assume you can feel your feet?" She reached and pinched the bottom of his foot, causing him to yelp.

"Don't do that!"

"But you could feel it!" the nurse teased. "I'll inform Dr. Uchiha, assuming she hasn't left for the day. Unfortunately, she's not scheduled for tomorrow."

"Not scheduled?"

"Didn't you notice that she didn't come in very often?"

"... No?"

The nurse looked incredulous. For a second. There was little way for Boruto to know this, and he shared the same incredulous expression with her. She rolled her eyes and sighed, aware of her mistake.

"In any case, I'll inform the doctors that you're awake now. You'll probably want to eat something, too."

"I guess."

"Do you want to see your friends and family?"

"Yeah," he answered.

"Okay. I'll head out now. And the doctor will be happy to see you're awake."

"Can I see her?"

"The doctor?"

"Yeah."

"Of course! I'll let her know that you want to speak to her."

The nurse left the room and a couple minutes later, Sakura Uchiha, although visibly ready to leave once her shift ended, walked into the room. She smiled to him and walked over to the window to get a look outside. Then she turned back to Boruto. "So, how are you feeling?" she asked.

"My back is stiff."

"Yeah, that's unfortunate," said Sakura. "Luckily, we were able to operate in time. I healed your vertebrae and your spinal cord. The latter we fixed in the nick of time."

"Thanks," he muttered.

She laughed. She could have gotten angry at him for just muttering a "thanks", but she understood that he was just coming off anesthesia, and was likely exhausted from the day's crazy events. She smiled again. A part of her wished that she could be his mom, but she also knew that she didn't want to marry Naruto, and she loved Sarada already. Still, she thought Boruto could be a beautiful boy when he wasn't being a brat. He had it in him, after all. He was his father's son.

And what if she had married Naruto? She couldn't imagine the children she'd have, but here, in this present, the thought of not having Sarada in her life was out of the question. Even when Sarada question her parentage, she still loved her. But it also felt like a

betrayal. You don't forget the pain of childbirth, nor the bonds you make right when your child is born. Sarada had every reason to be upset about how her parents hadn't told her about Karin.

Speaking of which, Sakura wondered if Sasuke was off gallivanting with her... or Orochimaru. The very thought gave her a headache.

"Mrs. Uchiha?" Boruto asked. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Sakura answered. She sat down next to his bed. "On a scale of 1 to 10, how much pain are you in?"

"Seven. When can I start going on missions again?"

"That depends on your rehab," Sakura said, getting pretty serious. "The damage that kick caused to your spine had the potential to paralyze you for life. As you pointed out, your back is pretty stiff. I suspect your therapist will focus on lower mobility and flexibility. But, since you've been able to move your arms and fingers the whole time, I wouldn't worry about your upper body *too much*."

"Will it hurt?"

"No pain, no gain, boy," she said. Boruto groaned. Sakura chuckled again.

She watched Boruto for a few minutes, checking the clock at the same time. Her shift wasn't over quite yet. It had also been extended because of the surgery. And since other people were making rounds right now, she had some time to visit with Boruto. But that report sitting at her desk needed attention like a cat.

She looked at him again. She remarked to herself how his pouting reminded her of his father when they were his age. A pang of nostalgia swept through her as she remembered those days. They were kids- *broken* kids-thrust into a system that didn't care about their well-being and would chew them up and spit them out faster than they could adjust. That nostalgia turned dark pretty quickly as

she looked at Boruto. He was just as much a victim of the system as they were. She'd heard that someone had shouted at Naruto about her son's unnecessary death. The more things changed, the more things stayed the same. Even if the shinobi system was engineered by a supernatural creature, that didn't change the fact that it had damaged the world to this extent.

"Dr. Uchiha?" Boruto's question brought her back to reality.

"Sorry," she said, "I got lost in thought. I was just thinking to myself how much you remind me of your father."

"Don't compare me to him!" Boruto snapped, whipping his head to look away from her.

She sighed. She should've expected that. "Well, I can see him in you," she said. "Especially those fierce eyes. It's just that... you never went through what he went through."

"I know, he tells me all the time," Boruto whined.

"Why do you think he does it?" Sakura asked. Lecturing him would be a waste. Now was a better time to listen.

"Because he's got his head so far up his ass!" Boruto shouted. Hearing these words from a kid shouldn't have been surprising, but Sakura was surprised and dumbfounded right now. Still, she laughed, but only because it felt so awkward.

"You still remind me of him," she said.

"Did you like him?"

"We were teammates. And best friends. He often joked that I was his girlfriend, but we both knew he was being a knucklehead. He even said it right in front of his father."

"But did you like him?"

"Yeah, I liked him. He was, and is still my friend."

"He looks happier to see you than he does mom," Boruto said in what was supposed to be an off-handed comment, but she must have heard him, because he looked back to her after what felt like an extended period of silence, and saw that she was staring at him, mouth agape.

He didn't know that she'd had a flashback to a moment, right after Pein's assault on Konoha, when Sai confronted her and told her, "*Naruto is in love with you!*" She would have to tell him. What was the worst that would happen? Boruto would ask his father about it? All of that was in the past, and it wouldn't matter now. It was no use keeping it a secret from Boruto.

"He used to have a crush on me," she casually told him. "He might have told you before, so forgive me if you already know."

"I don't think he told me," Boruto replied. "But I don't remember if he did."

Sakura shrugged. She didn't expect Boruto to remember every little detail of his life. "When we were kids, he'd try to get my attention all the time. I thought he was annoying. Then when we started to grow up, my opinions of him changed. But he remained that little knucklehead. I used to get annoyed whenever he'd act like an idiot."

"What would he do?"

"He pulled a lot of pranks, but he probably told you about a lot of these. But you have to understand; he did it because he was lonely, and he resented everyone's hatred of him. Your grandparents sacrificed their lives to save the Village, but in doing so, they could have ruined his life before even started.

"That must be what your mother saw in him. She was lonely, too. But..." She hesitated, maybe because she had something to say, but was reluctant to say it.

"It's not my place to say it," she sighed. "Every time I see him get so sad... it reminds me of when we were kids and he'd get so sad when he was lonely. Why hasn't anything changed?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Nothing," she sighed. "I should be going home soon. I'm scheduled for work at the flower shop tomorrow morning. I left some instructions for the doctors assigned to you." She stood up, bent over and kissed his forehead. "I'm proud of you. You've been very brave tonight." He felt the same comforting sensation from before the surgery. And speaking of which, he was still very, very tired, and he drifted back to sleep.

The marriage counsellor was surprised to see the Hokage and his wife again the next day, to say the least. His son's attack and injury were already old news to some extent, and now the search to find his attackers-the ones that got away-was on. He wasn't sure if it was awkward or an emergency, but if the Hokage had to avoid the public eye to see him, then this must be important, and the urgency was written all over their faces. To be clear, they hadn't rushed in, were in no hurry and were trying to put on a brave face. But the counsellor was also very certain that he wasn't going to like whatever they were about to say.

"So... let's get started!" he sighed.

Husband and wife glanced at each other, and the counsellor could see that they were trying to communicate nonverbally, but that didn't last long. "I'll tell him," said the Hokage.

"Okay," she answered.

Naruto went ahead and described the previous day's events after his son was attacked, which was already old news, as pointed out a couple of lines previously. He described how, pushed by the sheer stress, he yelled at his wife and demanded a divorce, only to

reconsider just moments later. He was visibly ashamed while describing the incident, but the counsellor's nonjudgmental, understanding demeanor helped him relax. He was definitely ashamed that he yelled at her, but even he could hear some uncertainty as to whether or not he was sorry for wanting to divorce her. These words spilled out on their own until he finally stopped himself.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I just-I have a lot of things on my mind."

"That's alright, Lord Hokage," the counsellor replied. "You've got a lot going on. It's alright if you just need to vent a little. You're going through a very emotional time. It's okay if you let yourself get upset. The idea is to take a step back, analyze your actions, and reassess your plans going forward. I know I already made my opinions on this marriage clear, but I'm always open to change that opinion."

"I just felt very guilty about saying I wanted a divorce while our son was in so much pain!"

"Did you try to see him last night?"

"The hospital told us he was asleep right when visiting hours ended. We'll see him again after this session."

"I... can see this is a hard time for you," said the counsellor. "You know, we can end early if this is too much."

Naruto took in a long, deep breath and let out a long, deep sigh. He repeated this several times until he sat up straight in his seat. He kept doing this, and then opened his eyes. "No, it's fine. We can continue."

The counsellor shrugged and returned to his notes. "Very well, then. Let's just go over what was going through your head while you were thinking of this."

"That's the thing; I wasn't thinking."

The marriage counsellor paused, but went back to his notes, flipped through a few pages and nodded when he found what he was looking for. "Oh, you're right! I forgot. I think I should move on, though. Lady Hinata; what were you thinking and how did you feel?"

At first, Hinata didn't respond. But that's because it was obvious to both Naruto and the marriage counsellor that she was deep in thought about the previous night. Naruto felt this the hardest, shamefully feeling like he couldn't read his wife's thoughts just from her expression. As much as he wanted to save his current marriage, that voice in the back of his mind asking if he really knew that much about Hinata reminded him why he was seriously considering divorce.

Finally she said, "I feel like I let my husband down." Naruto's stomach clenched and sank. "But he also pointed out that I was only in love with the idea of him. I thought about last night. I realized that he was right. I always admired him for his determination, and his Ninja Way. I always wished that I could be just like him. I still wish that I could be just like him."

"Alright, stop right there," the counsellor interrupted. "I'm confused. Are you two getting divorced or not?"

"We are," said Hinata. "May I please continue?"

"Go right ahead," said the counsellor.

"Thank you. I wanted Naruto to be happy. And I wanted him to be happy with me. But... he was right. I was selfish. And I pulled him into a marriage he never wanted."

"That's not entirely true," Naruto interjected. "Because I agreed to marry you. I need to know why, but I'll have to figure that out for myself. But I should be blamed for this, too. Now I realize my mistake."

"How'd you figure that out?" the counsellor asked.

"Kurama pointed it out," said Naruto.

"Kurama?"

"The Nine-Tails."

"Oooooohhhh, him!" the counsellor said. "Well, now that you point that out, that does make a lot of sense. Lady Hinata, why do you think he decided to marry you?"

"There was someone he had been interested in for a long time. I don't know what happened. He is right, though. And I think he settled for me because of something that happened between him and her. I used to wonder if he ever genuinely loved me or he still loved that other woman." She looked over to him as he hung his head in shame.

"I lied to myself that I did this because I genuinely loved Hinata," said Naruto. "I lied to myself that I loved Hinata. I hate people who lie to themselves."

"So you're going to go through with the divorce... when?"

"I don't know," said Naruto. "We'll have to do it when the village isn't gossiping about Boruto."

"If they found out, it could bring great shame upon us," Hinata added.

"And right when Boruto was almost killed," Naruto added.

"Yeah, no kidding," said the counsellor. "Alright, so lemme see if I can get this straight; you *do* want to get divorced, but not rush into it. That makes sense. I assume there are going to be some more sticking points. But, that's what we're here for. Lord Hokage, do you think your marriage to Lady Hinata is a cause of everything you might be ashamed of?"

"No," Naruto answered. "I don't know how everything went wrong. But I don't think Hinata was the only cause of it. Something's happened. Was it because I got older?"

"I'm not sure what that means," said the counsellor. He paused and considered something for a moment, then shrugged and turned back to his notes. "Unfortunately, these kinds of personal issues are not covered by these sessions, and it might cost you a little extra to discuss them. However, I can recommend someone who can help. Until then, I understand that divorce is a hard thing to do, both to decide on and to go through.

"But it doesn't have to be terrifying. And because of the situation you're in, you don't have to go blabbering on and on about it to everyone you know."

"I already told my top advisor," Naruto interrupted.

"... Okay, then... *most* of the people you know. Again, the good thing is, everything that happens in this room is confidential. I won't tell anybody, and I'll keep it that way unless you decide to share this with any divorce attorneys. Speaking of which, I can recommend some for you if you need them." He looked back at his notes. "Boy, you two got a lot of your chests today. But, something tells me this isn't the end of it. And I'm always here to talk if you need it."

"Thanks," said Naruto.

"Thank you so much," said Hinata.

"Any time," said the counsellor. "I guess you're going to see your son now?"

"Are we already done?" Naruto asked.

"Like I said, if you want to end early, we most certainly can. I think Boruto will be thrilled to see you. Go to him. That's more important right now."

Okay, so, um... I can explain why it took me so long to get this done.

I moved to a new house recently, and I've been very busy at my job. My writing's suffered a lot because of that. I've had to put up with nasty writer's block for the past several months, and as you can probably tell, it hurt the product. Unfortunately, I fear that this chapter suffered a lot, too. But I'd like to thank you guys for coming to my story and reviewing-except the people who've never heard of "Don't like, don't read" and still troll in my reviews.

I've also gotten some comments on Naruto's decision to get divorced, and that's part of the reason I decided to write up this passage with the counsellor. The main idea still hasn't changed, I still plan on getting Naruto and Hinata divorced, but now I understand that I can't rush things. It's the same with Naruto and Sakura.

Boruto's post-surgery fatigue is drawn from my own post-surgery experiences. I spent much of a weekend in the hospital sleeping after I was in a car accident, requiring me to get surgery.

In the meantime, you can also check out my one-shot, "The Nightmare" for some angsty fluffy NaruSaku goodness. Thanks for everything, guys!

Chapter 12

Boruto's friends and family were finally able to see him again late in the morning after the Rogue Ninja incident and his surgery. The news had shifted from Boruto's attack to his attacker. The Rogue Ninja Jiro was now being held in civilian jail like a common criminal, instead of the ninja prison. Naruto wanted to meet him, but he heard that Jiro was humiliated to be treated as such. Good. He was a common criminal, and one who hurt children, even if they could fight back. He deserved this utter humiliation, Naruto told himself. But he also wanted to know more about Jiro.

Getting back to Boruto, his back was still stiff the next morning. But when he tried to sit up without thinking, he found that he could sit up, but just barely, before the stiffness and pain stopped him. He could only sit up a couple centimeters before he collapsed-for lack of a better term-back onto the bed. He groaned.

The door opened. A nurse walked in, carrying a couple instruments with her. "Good morning," she said. "Sleep well last night?"

"Yeah," he answered.

"How's your back?"

"Still stiff."

"That's normal," she said. "Think you're ready for visitors?"

"Dr. Uchiha visited me last night," he answered.

"That's nice," she said.

"Where is she?"

"She's not here," the nurse said, keeping her tone upbeat but her overall demeanor was clearly unhappy. "Lately, she only comes in

once a week. I don't know why. If you ask me, it's because the Chief of Medicine is a stuck-up old fool who hates her name."

"Her name?"

"You don't know what Sasuke Uchiha did, do you?"

"I know my dad told me he once defected from the village," said Boruto. "He also told me he attacked the Five Kage Summit once."

"And other things," the nurse sighed.

"Like not visiting Dr. Uchiha for 12 years," said Boruto.

"How do you know that-oh, of course, her daughter's your teammate. I'm sorry." Boruto didn't answer. But his silence allowed the nurse to remember something. "Oh! I almost forgot. We're going to let you see some visitors today. I'm sure your friends will be thrilled to see you're alright!"

"Why didn't I see them last night?"

"Because visiting hours were over and you were super tired," the nurse answered.

"Oh."

"But they're about to start letting visitors in. You'll know when they show up."

"Okay."

"Can you remind me what happened?" the nurse asked, jotting some notes down and simultaneously prepping an IV bag.

"Some rogue ninjas jumped us," Boruto answered. "One kicked me in the back."

"Oh, that sounds bad," she said. She wasn't looking at him, so Boruto wasn't sure if she meant that his injury sounded bad, or that his fight sounded bad. To be honest, he didn't make himself look good. If he told Konohamaru, he'd probably say those were the least of his worries, but Boruto didn't see it that way. "Are you alright, sweetie? Is something wrong? Well, besides your back."

"No!" Boruto snapped.

"Do you feel... angry?"

"NO!"

"I'll take that as a yes," said the nurse. "It's understandable to feel angry after you get hurt like this. And from what I hear... sorry. I don't want to rub it in."

Boruto huffed and turned his head away from the nurse. That didn't stop her from doing her tests, he figured out when he felt her playing with something in his inner elbow. Looking over at his left arm, he could see her remove something from his IV tube, only to replace it with another one.

"We'll have you started on physical therapy as soon as you're ready," the nurse continued. "You just need to put as much effort as you've put into your ninja training, and you'll be as good as new. It'll take a while, so be patient. Now, I've heard that you're a very impatient boy, so, even though I hate saying this... this might be for the best."

"SHUT UP!" Boruto snapped, whipping his head back to the window. The nurse sighed and continued her work.

"Of course," she said. "I sincerely apologize if I hurt your feelings."

"But you CAN get better. You just need to put in the time and effort, and you can do it. That's how your father did it, after all."

"Don't talk to me about him."

The nurse pursed her lips, took a deep breath, sighed, and went back to work. She told herself that she shouldn't be surprised anymore, not when Boruto was still in an awful mood. Though he did cooperate with her as she ran a few more tests on him and changed his catheter. The sheer look of embarrassment on his face made her chuckle, but not at him, as she was forced to explain. To be specific, it was necessary for someone in his condition, and it was alright to be embarrassed at having to use such an intrusive device.

"You should be able to stop using it when you've regained some mobility," she finished. Blushing, Boruto tried to remove his pillow, but settled for covering his face with his hands, instead. He remained in that position until she finally finished changing the bag and left. He was in the middle of figuring out how to hide the bag when three people burst into his room. He almost caught the bag, juggled it, and stuffed it under his covers, where they'd already been. To his relief, Sarada, Mitsuki and Himawari didn't notice it.

"Big brother!" Himawari happily bellowed, jumping into the bed. It ended about as well as one would expect. Boruto had to gingerly push his sister off his stomach while trying not to make his back hurt even more.

"Hi-ma-wa-ri!" he grunted. Mitsuki leaned forward and pulled Himawari off him. But, he pulled her off like he was ripping a band-aid off, and Boruto felt the agony shoot through his spine when he rebounded off the bed. He lay there, waiting for the pain to subside, unable to look at Sarada shoving Mitsuki to the floor. Not that it mattered, but he would've laughed.

He noticed Konohamaru-sensei entering through the corner of his left eye. Freyja was with him, but not her husband, whose name escaped Boruto. His teacher had never looked both so relieved, nor guilty before. Boruto opened his mouth to speak, but Konohamaru held his hand up, stopping him from speaking. "How are you, Boruto?"

"Still stiff," Boruto answered.

"Thanks to my mom, you'll be good as new, back to your old annoying self," Sarada said haughtily.

"Sarada..." Konohamaru groaned. Unable to contain himself, Konohamaru snapped his feet together and bowed so low that his forehead was parallel to the floor. "Boruto, I'm so sorry! Please forgive me!"

"Sensei!" Sarada gasped.

"What!?" Freyja gasped as well.

"We were warned of the threat! I should've had us take the train back into Konoha! I should've been more careful! This is all my fault, and the Hokage's son is crippled!"

"Konohamaru, get a hold of yourself!" Freyja gapsed.

"Freyja, it *is* my fault!" Konohamaru snapped back. "I don't deserve to call myself a teacher! And it's because of me that Boruto's in such bad shape!"

"Sensei, we're not mad at you!" said Sarada.

"Konohamaru, just be glad the Allfather thought to spare Boruto's life," said Freyja, "Now all we must do is to pray to Eir to speed his recovery." She paused, noticing that everyone else was staring at her. "My *gods* !" she gasped.

"Ooooh, her gods!" said Mitsuki.

"Well, I said it last night, and I will say it again; war is no place for children," she said. "I am glad my country did away with such a barbarous practice."

"Freyja, please," Konohamaru pleaded, "That's very rude."

"Yes, yes, I know," she said. "I am sorry."

"So, anyway, you should thank my mom for helping you out," Sarada said, continuing in her haughty tone.

"I think I did," Boruto answered. "She was here last night."

"Well, that's just like her," said Sarada.

"And she said she was proud of me and kissed my forehead."

"Yep, that's my mom, alri-WHAT!?"

"Yeah, she kissed me goodnight!" Boruto teased back. "She tucked me in and everything!"

"She's *my* mom, you brat!" she hissed. "You already have a good one!"

"Guys, *stop* !" Konohamaru begged, getting between the two and nudging Sarada away from the bed.

"Where is she?" Boruto asked, obviously referring to Sakura.

"She's not here today," said Sarada. "I don't know why, but she hasn't been going to work as much. Then she got the job at the Mrs Yamanaka's flower shop."

"What... why isn't she working here?" Boruto asked.

"I don't know," Sarada sighed. "All I know is that things have gotten worse since then. She tries to look brave, but I can see that she's in really bad shape."

"I don't think she told me that," Boruto said.

"I think she's keeping more from *me*," said Sarada, "Besides the possibility that we could lose our house."

"How do you know that?" Mitsuki asked. He'd been looking for an excuse-er, reason-to inject himself into the conversation for the past

few minutes.

"A woman's intuition," Sarada answered while doing yet another haughty hair flip.

"But it doesn't have to be terrifying. And because of the situation you're in, you don't have to go blabbering on and on about it to everyone you know."

"I already told my top advisor," Naruto interrupted.

"... Okay, then... *most* of the people you know. Again, the good thing is, everything that happens in this room is confidential. I won't tell anybody, and I'll keep it that way unless you decide to share this with any divorce attorneys. Speaking of which, I can recommend some for you if you need them." He looked back at his notes. "Boy, you two got a lot of your chests today. But, something tells me this isn't the end of it. And I'm always here to talk if you need it."

"Thanks," said Naruto.

"Thank you so much," said Hinata.

"Any time," said the counsellor. "I guess you're going to see your son now?"

"Are we already done?" Naruto asked.

"Like I said, if you want to end early, we most certainly can. I think Boruto will be thrilled to see you. Go to him. That's more important right now."

Naruto paused and nervously stared at the marriage counsellor, who was already packing his things up. Hinata had already gotten up to leave, but stopped when she noticed that her soon-to-be ex-husband was staring off into space. Aware of common accusations against her of being a vapid, one-note character, she lightly smacked his

arm, bringing him back into reality. But she immediately saw the tears beginning to form in his eyes. Feeling immediately guilty, she left her hand on his left shoulder. "We're going to see our son," she said.

The marriage counsellor looked up from his work, unaware that Naruto had been staring off into space. "Oh yeah, visiting hours should have started by now," he said.

"We should go," said Naruto. "And we'll have to stop by the Yamanaka flower shop to pick something up for him."

"Great idea," said the marriage counsellor. "Don't wait for me. My next appointment isn't for another half-hour."

"Thank you for all your work," Naruto said, bowing to him, along with Hinata, before they both left the office.

True to Naruto's words, the Yamanaka flower shop was the first place they stopped. All it took to turn a simple visit into an event was one person, who looked up from some native flowers, gasped and announced, "It's the Hokage!" Quickly, everyone in the store stopped what they were doing, and turned to the couple of the hour. While they, the customers, maybe 10 or less, were in awe of the Hokage's presence, the latter and his wife simply felt awkward. They obviously had not prepared for the possibility of causing a scene. Worsening the awkwardness, this would probably be one of the final times they would be seen in public as a married couple. Knowing they had to keep up the noh act-again-they bowed to the customers, thanked them and gestured to be left alone. The customers immediately returned to their previous activities, allowing the both of them to enter the store to begin shopping.

Even Sakura and Ino, both standing behind the counter, stopped their paperwork to see the Hokage and his wife. Although both were surprised to see him, Sakura was even more surprised, but not to Ino's surprise. She stared at Naruto, surprised at first, and then fondly when she saw him getting nervous. Ino noticed Sakura's stare

and grinned. She grinned wider when Sakura chuckled at how he bowed to the customers. Such a gesture wasn't entirely necessary, but it was totally the newer, more mature Naruto.

She watched them wandering the store, occasionally running into customers who profusely apologized for getting in their way. Naruto could only quietly urge them not to bother him, as his son's injury was finally being reported on the news. This was enough to get people to give the couple the necessary space.

Sakura was so caught up in watching the Hokage that she almost didn't notice a customer come forward to buy some flowers. It embarrassed her a little, but she laughed it off.

"Sakura, why don't you water some of the flowers?" Ino asked. Her tone sounded pleasant, and it was. But Sakura could also hear a little annoyance. Translation? *Stop staring at the Hokage.*

"Yeah, sure," Sakura answered before stepping aside to water the flowers. Simultaneously, Naruto stepped away from his wife to look at some flowers. Their paths met near some roses that Sakura had stopped to inspect. Naruto almost bumped into her, but stopped himself. He was very delighted to see her, and so was she to him.

"Sakura!" he said enthusiastically. Then, he remembered his propriety, and bowed to her. "I mean, thank you, Dr. Uchiha, for saving my son."

Sakura returned the bow. "Just doing my duty, Lord Hokage," she replied.

Hinata soon joined her husband, and bowed, as well. "Thank you, Dr. Uchiha," she said. "How can I ever repay you for saving my son?"

"You don't have to," Sakura answered. "As I told the Lord Hokage, it's my duty as a doctor to help my patients. Will you be visiting him?"

"Yes," said Hinata. "We are just here to find a gift for him."

"Oh, there should be something over by the end of the wall," Sakura said, pointing at a gift rack.

"Thank you," said Hinata. "And... what are you doing here? Shouldn't you be at the hospital?"

"I'd rather not talk about it," Sakura answered. "Please, continue shopping." Hinata bowed and then walked over to the gift stand at the wall, but remained within earshot. But Naruto lingered.

"I mean it," he said, "Thank you so much."

"I told you, think nothing of it," she said. She smiled, causing his heart to skip a beat.

"You look great!" Naruto told her. Her heart also skipped a beat. He meant it as a normal compliment, but Ino and Hinata could hear something else. Somewhere, deep down, old feelings had stirred. It would be a while before they resurfaced, but for now, they were just talking as friends.

"Thank you," she replied, a small blush appearing in her cheeks.

"Naruto," Hinata said, drawing his attention away from Sakura.

"Sorry, Hinata," Naruto told her. He turned back to Sakura. "I mean it. Thank you for saving my son."

"You should be happier," she said, as if to finish a sentence he was thinking about.

"Something's telling me that this is my fault," he said.

"Maybe because it is?" Sakura asked. "Sorry. It's not my place."

Naruto paused, turned to Hinata and asked, "Do you think Boruto's injury was my fault?"

"I don't think so," Hinata answered. "It was out of your control, was it not?"

Visibly reluctant to question the Hokage's wife, Sakura scrunched her lips. Noticing Ino staring at her, she went back to watering the flowers. "All I know is that you promised to change the system," she said.

"Maybe that's it," said Naruto. He paused, and let himself get lost in his own thoughts. "Where did I go wrong, Sakura?" he asked. Her smile faded. She became serious. "When did I become the very thing I hated? When did I become worse than scum?"

"You have to answer that yourself," she answered.

"Did I already ask you that?"

"I think it needs repeating," she answered.

"I've made so many mistakes, but I don't know where to begin," he said. "And I lied to myself."

"I'm glad you admit it," she said.

"And now I have to fix my mistakes."

"I'm sure you will," she said. "Now if you'll excuse me, Ino clearly wants me to get back to work."

"Oh. Sorry!"

"Naruto?" Hinata asked, walking up to him and holding something in her hand. "I found something. What do you think?"

Naruto took a short, but careful look at the item, and then nodded his head. "He'll love it," he said.

They paid at the counter. Ino thanked them both for coming, complete with a bow. As they were leaving, Sakura walked up to

them. "I visited Boruto after the surgery last night," Sakura told the both of them. "He'll need a few months of physical therapy. But, you'll be happy to know that he's still the same bratty kid he was before."

"That sounds just like him," said Hinata.

"Yep," said Naruto.

"Please, take care of yourselves," Sakura told them. "I wish you the best of luck."

"Thanks," Naruto said before he and Hinata departed the flower shop. Watching him, Sakura marveled how he could get his act together so well... while she still couldn't. her gaze remained on Naruto for several seconds before she heard Ino clear her throat.

"So you can't move?"

"No, Chocho," Boruto grumbled.

"How do you go to the bathroom?" Inojin asked.

"I'm not answering that."

"Why did you even think of that?" Shikadai asked.

"I'm curious!" Inojin whined.

"Do not worry, Boruto! You'll be good as new in no time!" Metal declared, making one of the silliest poses Boruto had ever seen.

"Gee, thanks," Boruto said flatly. He'd thought that his friends coming to see him would be better than this, but it wasn't what he expected, as has been shown. Of all the questions they should be asking...

"Can I see your scar, big brother?" Himawari asked.

"I can't move!" Boruto repeated.

"Everyone, please," Konohamaru sheepishly begged, "You don't have to ask questions he doesn't want to answer."

"But our youthful curiosity must be quenched!" Metal declared. It didn't need to be said, because it's been repeated ad nauseum, but he was his father's spitting image, Konohamaru mused.

"Come on guys, that's enough," Sarada announced. "We're just here to show Boruto that we've got his *back* ." She shot him a smug grin. Groaning, he covered his face.

The door opened. Everyone turned to see Hinata first gingerly step inside, then run to Boruto, throwing her arms around him, crying about how her baby was okay. "Mom! Mom!" he grunted, forcing her to let him go.

"Are you alright?" she asked, brushing his hair out of his eyes so they could get a better look at each other.

"The doctor said I'll be fine, with some physical therapy," he answered.

"We saw Dr. Uchiha earlier," said Hinata, "She told us the same thing. And she said she visited you last night."

"Yeah, she did," said Boruto. Now it was his turn to give Sarada a smug grin.

"I'm just so relieved you'll be fine," she sighed.

They heard the door open again. The room instantly silenced as Naruto stepped inside, his Hokage cape dramatically blowing behind him. Everyone except for Hinata and Sarada stepped aside to give the Hokage and his son a way to look at each other. Stopping a couple of steps into the room, he set his gaze on Boruto. Boruto returned it. Father and son sized each other up for a couple minutes, as if waiting to strike. Boruto would have struck first. He glared at his father, and would have turned his head away, had he not been

immobile, and his mother at his bedside. But Naruto... Naruto's expression told a different story. At first he stood tall and stoic, but he was fiddling with a gift in his hands. It dawned on Boruto that his father wasn't glaring at him, and so Boruto's expression eased, as well.

Suddenly, Naruto dropped to his knees into a *seiza* position, then bent forward, bowing. Everyone gasped.

"Boruto!" he cried, "Please, forgive me!"

Hello, everyone! Sorry this took so long to finish! I've been busy, and have had to force myself to write sometimes. Even though I've written a lot of Voltron fics lately... Writer's block is a bitch. There isn't much I can say, other than I wish this was a better chapter, but this is what happens when you practically force yourself to write.

I'll try to get the next chapter up, but please tell me how I did! I know it wasn't the best chapter so far, but I still appreciate honest, constructive feedback.

Chapter 13

"Boruto! Please, forgive me!"

Everyone in the room gasped when they saw the Hokage drop to a *seiza*, bow, and apologize. " *Lord Hokage!* " was the collective cry. Even Hinata, who knew about her husband's guilt over everything, and Boruto, who'd just been assuming that his father never really cared about him, looked on, stunned.

"I have not only been a failure as a father, I've failed as the Hokage!"

The gasps were louder, especially from Hinata. She knew about the former declaration because of the marriage counselling sessions. But, his sudden surprised her as much as it surprised everyone else. But as she watched, she realized that she should have expected this. And it made her realize that in the end, she really was never the right person for him. It was a childish crush that started just because he played with her once. Even though she genuinely respected and admired his character, there was no chance for them to have anything that could last as long as this did. And when she saw him break down in front of their son, the guilt struck. They were both to blame, for sure, but she certainly didn't help matters.

"Everything I did... everything I fought for... all the sacrifices... It was all for nothing! Nothing's changed!" he keened on the verge of tears. "I wanted to become Hokage so I could get the recognition I thought I deserved. And then I did it to change the system. But I haven't done that! I've become what I hated! And because of that, my own son was almost killed! You have every right to hate me not just for putting you in danger, but for breaking my promises! Please! Forgive me!"

Silence; stunned silence. The only sounds came from outside; normal bird noises, a gust of wind, footsteps and chatter coming and going, kids shouting, a dog barking. No one moved. Well, a few

eyeballs moved. But no one moved from their spots. Unable to move anyway, Boruto just stared at his father, his mouth agape. Sarada was, interestingly enough, the first one to notice that he was visibly none too thrilled with his father's apology. She'd moved just a little bit and noticed his expression. "Um, Boruto, are you alright?" she asked.

"I'm fine," Boruto answered.

"Please say something, Boruto," Naruto begged.

But Boruto remained silent. He would have whipped his head to the other side if he could. So he did the next best thing, looking away from his father. Getting the hint, Naruto sighed and stood. Hinata walked over to him to assess the situation. His expression was flat. He didn't even look at her. Sighing, she stepped aside, resigned to the fact that she didn't set his heart aflame, as he'd mentioned before. Still, she had something to say herself. Taking a deep breath, she said,

"I have to agree with your father, Boruto. In fact, I have to take responsibility for my failures, as well."

"What failures, Lady Hinata?" Konohamaru inquired.

"It's complicated," Hinata answered, "But I regret some of the decisions I made as a wife and mother. Do you think I wasn't firm enough, Boruto?"

"No," Boruto croaked.

"I'd say yes," said Sarada.

"Shut up!" Boruto snapped at her.

"Thanks for your input, Sarada," Naruto said. "Anyway, lately I've been wondering why things have felt off. I feel like one of my many decisions might've brought me down a road I never wanted to follow.

And before you accuse me of being selfish, that includes what just happened."

"Gee, thanks," said Boruto.

"Um, Lord Hokage? Do you want everyone else to leave so you can talk about this as a family?" Konohamaru asked.

" NO ." Boruto replied.

"OR, maybe we should stay," Mitsuki gestured to himself, Sarada and Konohamaru, "And everyone else can leave."

"Actually, it might be a good idea for all of you to stay for just a minute longer," Naruto sighed. "Fact of the matter is, this decision I'm going to announce has been at the back of my mind for a while. Starting today, I'm suspending all genin and chunin missions." He braced for the inevitable.

The inevitable was delayed by 30 seconds as everyone in the room processed his decision. At the end of those thirty seconds, during which Naruto fidgeted, bit his lower lip and flicked his eyes around the room, the gathered group angrily howled, shouting at the Hokage. The loud burst of noise caused him to flinch. He wished he could've prepared for it, but the noise in the small, closed space was like a dog barking directly in his ear from inches away. Everyone's voices merged as they shouted their objections. He didn't move; he knew they would react this way. He knew he couldn't change the culture overnight, which was his excuse for not implementing this sooner (a cowardly excuse, no doubt). Still, the loud commotion caused him to reconsider for a second before he glimpsed his son.

"Enough!" he declared. "I should have done this a long time ago!"

"But why now!?" Sarada objected. "Are you scared or something!?"

"Yesterday, a woman yelled at me. She said her son was dead because I sent him on a mission when he was 12. Out of frustration,

she accused me of only caring about children when they're mine."

"Yeah, but you had good reason to worry about Boruto," Konohamaru objected.

"I did, but that's not the point," said Naruto. "She forced me to think about everything I've done as Hokage. And I've concluded that I've failed."

"So... you're not changing your mind," Sumire Kakei, Boruto's former class representative currently working with the Scientific Ninja Weapons Team (and was out of Naruto's line of sight earlier) concluded.

"No," said Naruto, "I will not. And that means the Chunin Exams will not take place. Or at least they won't if I can convince the other Kages."

Again, the uproar erupted. Naruto stood by and let the uproar die down. "I knew you'd react that way." *Kurama, what do I do next? Help me out here!*

" *Nope! You're on your own!* " Kurama sniggered. Naruto couldn't believe it.

Even worse, he noticed Boruto glaring at him, but with his mouth open in disbelief. Immediately, Naruto knew Boruto was going to be angry. He could see the boy was flexing his fingers as if he wanted to punch the Hokage. Normally that would result in punishment, but he and Himawari got away with it before. But he knew Boruto was wishing he wasn't immobilized so he *could* punch him. The situation gradually dawned on everyone who wasn't yelling at the Hokage. Seeing that Naruto wasn't looking at them, Sarada checked back on Boruto. She was the first to notice Boruto was about to explode. Konohamaru glimpsed her in his peripheral vision, figured out was wrong and also looked behind him on Boruto. Himawari, Chocho and Inojin were next. Shikadai was too engrossed in explaining the importance of genin and chunin missions to notice.

"ARE YOU KIDDING ME!?" Boruto shouted. Since everyone except Shikadai, Hinata and Sumire were looking at him, his outburst was not a surprise.

"Boruto, I know you're made, but-"

"But *WHAT!?* " Boruto interrupted. "YOU COWARD!" He tried to sit up. But the pain he was visibly in and the contraption keeping him immobile stopped him. "YOU'RE THE WORST DAD EVER!"

"I also knew you'd be angry," Naruto lamented.

"Then why are you doing this!?"

"I'm doing this for you!"

"But you're not!"

"Watch your tongue, young man!" Hinata snapped.

"Oh, so you're just going to take his side!?"

"Because you're being ungrateful!" Sarada snapped as well.

"Not when my ninja career is just starting!"

"Do you not hear yourself!?" Sarada shouted. "You're strapped to a bed with a broken spine. Your ninja career might as well be over!"

"I'll get better! I'll become a ninja again!"

"I haven't even decided when the missions will re-start," Naruto said.
"I still need to-"

"Oh, so you're just making this up as you go along!? Just like your whole 'adventure'!?"

"HEY!" Naruto snapped. "You listen to your mother, watch your mouth!"

"And what are you going to do about it!?" Boruto asked. "I'm already crippled!"

"Lord Hokage, I do think you should reconsider," Shikadai calmly pleaded. "You're making a rash decision based on your emotions. Maybe you should take a step back."

"No, I've been thinking about it and I still intend to carry it out," said Naruto. "I can't bear to put anymore children in danger after-"

"Then why are you doing it NOW?" Boruto interrupted. "That old lady was right, you don't care about other kids!"

"Calm down, Boruto, he just explained why," said Sarada. "It's still a bad decision."

"Look, I'm just suspending the missions until it's safe for chunin and genin," said Naruto. "I need to create a policy-"

"Oh, give me a break!" Boruto interrupted.

"I was going to explain!" Naruto groaned.

"I know what you're doing! You're scared people will find out I got hurt, and you're going to cover it up, because you're a selfish jerk!"

"That's not-" Naruto paused, thought about it and straightened himself up. "How could you possibly think that? Do you hate me that much? Yes, I haven't been a great father. But I *want* to get better, if you'll only let me!"

Still driven by his irrational anger, Boruto scoffed and spat. Chocho groaned in disgust. "It's too late," said Boruto. "I *hate* you."

"Excuse me!?" The new voice was the latest startling event that caused the whole room to turn around. Sakura stood in the doorway, a stuffed animal in one hand and a card in the other, made out to Boruto. "Um, what's going on?"

"Mom! What're you doing here!?" Sarada called. "And how did you-"

Let's take a step back for a moment to see how Sakura arrived at the hospital so quickly; the moment Naruto and Hinata left the flower shop, to be specific.

Her conversation with him ended and he left, flowers in hand, to visit Boruto in the hospital. For the first time she could remember in years, she hadn't seen the sad Hokage, but the young man she knew and became friends with, now mature and confident in himself, and, most importantly, knew that he'd made a mistake somewhere and wanted to fix it. His determination to set things right, or at least get himself out of a funk he was in-she could tell just by the way he spoke-in the face of great personal struggle reflexively made her smile at his figure. He stood broad-shouldered, head held high and walked with the grace of a fighter. Her heart began to pound just then, accompanied by warmth that spread from her chest and through her very being.

She remembered the old days, not through the rose-tinted glasses of nostalgia, but what they really were; long days spent training to improve his wood style, strengthen, unlock the mysteries of Sage Mode, and all of it was spurred on by his personal Ninja Way to never give up. His very attitude pushed her to improve herself, beginning with her desire to see his dreams achieved, but turned into her own burning Will of Fire to never give up and to strive to improve her own skills every day. He inspired her to study along with Lady Tsunade, to become the best medic she could be, to get stronger physically, emotionally and mentally. And if he could push her, she could push him, too.

She was beginning to think about something else when she heard Ino clearing her throat. Sakura didn't turn around, suspecting that Ino was unhappy that she was distracted. Had she turned around, she would've seen Ino's soft grin. Well, actually, she did turn around, but Ino wasn't grinning when she sheepishly turned around. "Oh, um, Ino-"

Her friend/boss pointed at the counter. Sakura slumped back over there.

But just a few minutes later, Ino walked up to Sakura while she was in the midst of examining some paperwork. "Y'know... I was wondering... have you taken your break yet?"

"Not yet," Sakura answered without looking up from the paperwork.

"Stop working and go on break," said Ino.

Sakura paused in the middle of her work and looked up at Ino. She saw that she was being serious. "Why?"

"Because I said so," Ino answered. "Also, you're going to visit Boruto today."

"I visited him last night."

"Well, do it again," said Ino.

Sakura's jaw opened slightly, confused, but also like she wanted to ask Ino why she was sending her on her break right now. Looking around, her question was answered by the lack of anyone in the store. There was just one customer, and all they were doing was browsing the flowers. They probably weren't even going to buy anything. It was annoying, but no one could control whether or not someone wanted to buy anything. The best she could say was, 'do you need help' and then let the customer decide on their own. This customer was... not deciding.

"Fine," she breathed.

"Bring him a stuffed animal," Ino chuckled. "I'm sure he'd like that."

"Probably not," Sakura chuckled, too.

"Just tell him it's on me," Ino insisted.

"Okay, that I can do. So you'll pay me for delivering it, right?"

Ino scrunched her lips, unhappy that Sakura had kind of backed her into a corner. "Yeah, sure. Okay, don't clock out. Go on the delivery and go on break when you get back. And don't take TOO long."

So Sakura set off with the stuffed animal in one arm and the card in another just a couple minutes later. And since the hospital was just a short walk from the Yamanaka flower shop. Since this wasn't her first visit to the hospital on a relative day off, she wasn't nervous about seeing her co-workers in her regular clothes. Her boss at the hospital, on the other hand, was another story. His adamant refusal to let her operate on Boruto before the Hokage's intervention still troubled her. On top of her financial situation, she still needed to fix her employment situation. The likelihood that she had a case against the hospital for clan discrimination helped.

While this was happening, her thoughts strayed back to Naruto. She kept thinking about how he seemed to have everything together, while she... didn't quite have it together. Whether or not she could save her home was still in question. And while she loved Sarada more than anything, she wondered why Sasuke couldn't just tell them where he was and why he couldn't just stay in Konoha, even to help just a little bit. Had she made a made a huge mistake marrying Sasuke and bearing his daughter? She didn't like to think about it when she did think about it. She *had* achieved one of her dreams, but her life felt empty for reasons she couldn't explain well. Sasuke *had* done horrible things to others, and to her. What did she even see in him? Even if he had some reasons to be angry at the world, it didn't excuse the times he tried to kill her. Had she forced herself onto him? Now she was guilty for that.

Randomly, her thoughts seemed to stray to another image; what if she and Naruto had married? It was a preposterous concept! She, marrying Naruto, and living a happy, healthy life, together as equals- NO! NO! She loved Sasuke, and she was happy she married him?

Really?

She'd once said that when a girl falls in love, her heart cannot be changed. But occasionally, she saw other women divorce their husbands and find happiness with someone else. She never thought highly of it, but the concept was tugging at her. She also wondered, was she even right to say that her heart couldn't be changed? What was she thinking?

The hospital's façade caught her attention and she snapped out of her own thoughts. She had a job to deliver something to Boruto and she needed to do it.

She was greeted warmly by most of the staff upon her entrance... except for the chief of medicine. Apparently, he was still bitter over what happened yesterday. But she smiled at him anyway, feeling smug that it was only a matter of time until she could get her full-time position back. And that would immediately help her finances. She could keep her house. And maybe, just maybe, Sasuke could return home.

The elevator door opened and she stepped into the hallway. A few nurses passing by nodded in her direction, a gesture she returned. It was only a short walk to Boruto's room, so she only encountered less nurses than she could count on her hand, all of whom were friends and were also visibly busy. She strode up to Boruto's room and heard him shouting, "I HATE YOU!", opened the door and found the room already full of people arguing.

"Hello? Excuse me? EXCUSE ME?" Everyone-Naruto, Boruto, Hinata, Inojin, Chocho, Himawari, Konohmaru, that Fjordlandish woman and Sarada, stopped their argument, turned in the direction of the entrance and stared at her. "Um, what's going on?"

"Mom! What are you doing here!?" Sarada shouted. "And what are you-"

"I, uh, have a present I need to deliver to Boruto. It's from Ino." Everyone turned to look at Inojin, who shrugged. "This was your mom's idea, Inojin." She stepped inside, carefully maneuvering

through the crowd. She felt the heat of awkward embarrassment rising in her chest as she made her way through the maze until she reached Boruto's bedside, laid the card on his nightstand and the stuffed animal in his lap, or where it would be. "No need to pay," she said sheepishly. "It's on Ino."

"Thanks," Boruto huffed.

"Um, I don't mean to be rude," she said sheepishly, while sheepishly turning around and sheepishly smiling. "But... what were you arguing about before I rudely interrupted you?"

"It's nothing, mom," said Sarada, "Just some domestic squabbles in the Hokage's family."

"He's the worst father ever!" Boruto snapped.

"Where have I heard *that* before?" Sakura deadpanned.

"I'll tell you now, Sakura," said Naruto. "I'm ending chunin and genin missions for now."

Sakura's sheepish face changed. Now she was visibly surprised. She turned around to look at Boruto, then back to Naruto. "Excuse me?"

"He's ending my career before it began!"

"Someone else just tried to do that!" Sarada objected.

"Naruto, did you even *think* about this!?" Sakura asked.

"Well, no, but-I, I just... I thought now was a better time to do it."

"So, you've actually been thinking about this?"

"Not... really..." Naruto trailed off.

Typical Naruto, she thought, sighing. She always admired his off-the-cuff style, but it was also aggravating. "Listen," she said, " *You*, Naruto, should've thought this out ahead of time, and not right after your son's well-being is threatened and he's in an already precarious emotional state. I hope you're not planning anything else, are you? I sure hope not! But either way, I support this overdue overhaul to the ninja system, but for goodness sake, do it when you've thought out the details, and when your son isn't emotionally stressed, just a day after his career could've ended, anyway!"

"You tell 'im!" Boruto interjected. "He-"

SMACK!

The room felt deathly silent again. Needless to say, Boruto was surprised the most at getting slapped. Freyja was the only person who wasn't very surprised, in fact she was visibly satisfied to see him get slapped. She had nothing else to do in this domestic squabble. But Boruto stared up at Sakura. Where had that motherly kindness gone? Judging by Sarada's expression, however, she must've seen Sakura's current expression before.

"And as for *you*," she said to Boruto, "While I did just tell your father that he should've waited, *you*, young man, are in no position to tell your father that you hate him, not when he's kind of acting in your best interests! You could've been killed, fed to a machine that messed up I and my friends, and your reaction is to tell your father that you hate him? From what I've seen, he's not the best father, yes, but there's been times he's tried, *right* ?" She turned around to Naruto, causing him to go white. " *You* are a spoiled brat!"

"That's what I said," Sarada whispered.

"You owe your father an apology for being so ungrateful," Sakura continued. "He dropped everything after he found out about this, and he begged me to save you! He even gave the chief of medicine a good talking to just to get me to operate on you! Your father loves you, and this is the thanks he gets?"

"How did you know what he said?" Hinata asked.

"I heard him right before I entered," Sakura replied.

"Lord Naruto even apologized to Boruto," said Sarada.

"Even worse!" Sakura groaned. "Hinata, I know how much Boruto means to you, but couldn't you have disciplined him better? Not by beating him, of course."

Hinata took a deep breath and sighed. "I wish you weren't telling me how to be a mother," she lamented.

"Oops. Sorry, I get a little passionate sometimes and-oh, no! I have to get going." She turned around and bowed to Boruto. "I'm really sorry I slapped you," she said. "Here, let me give you a little chakra." She touched Boruto's back, infusing it with chakra, like she said should. "There. That should help the healing process." Then she turned around to everyone else and bowed. "I'm sorry if I was rude to everyone."

"You're forgiven?" Naruto answered.

Sakura smiled softly at him. "I know you mean well. I just don't want to fix your problems. I've got my own, after all."

"Thanks," Naruto answered. "I know you can solve them." His response caused Sakura to light up.

"You're still ending chunin and genin missions, though," Sakura concluded.

"Yeah," he answered. "It's the right thing to do."

"Good," Sakura answered.

It wasn't much, but Hinata could see the looks in their eyes. They took her back to her childhood and adolescence. Back then, Naruto and Sakura were very close, almost like siblings at times. They'd

fought together alongside Sasuke and then Sai, and forged one of the strongest bonds in the whole village. Back then, she had a bad habit of kinda-sorta stalking Naruto because of how her father had forbidden her from playing with him after that one time. And although now she regretted it, she felt better whenever she watched him from afar. But even then, she often watched him with Sakura. The two were almost inseparable, making Hinata think the occasional dark thoughts about getting rid of Sakura, telling herself that Sakura was useless. That she was a bitch for how she handled Naruto. But looking back, it was clear; Sakura was what Naruto needed, in a way. And in return, Naruto gave Sakura the strength *she* needed.

Hinata knew about and regretted her jealousy now. She was going to change that.

Sakura hurried past Hinata and Naruto, drawing the former out of her thoughts. With no one looking, she slipped out the door behind Sakura. The pink-haired woman heard the door closing and turned around to smile at Hinata. "He'll be fine," she said.

"Thank you so much for taking care of my son," Hinata said, deeply bowing. "I'm sorry for all the trouble he's caused."

"It's no big deal," said Sakura. "I was just doing my job. But... I am really sorry if I offended you for your parenting style."

"I wasn't, actually, but I accept your apology," Hinata answered.

"You take care of Naruto and Boruto, okay?" Sakura said.

"Actually... you take care of them," Hinata said.

"Huh!?" Sakura was about to continue, but Hinata ducked inside Boruto's hospital room without answering Sakura. And since she was on a time crunch, Sakura dropped the subject and left.

Naruto was exhausted when he returned to work. Things had calmed down at Boruto's hospital room before his departure, but remained awkward. Sakura Uchiha's sudden, unexpected arrival and just-as-sudden departure felt like it stuck out because of how random it felt. No one wanted to talk after that, so the room just quietly emptied and everyone went on their merry way. Naruto was the second-to-last to leave. Hinata lingered with their son for a little while longer to help comfort him in this emotionally stressful time. And yes, Naruto regretted bringing up his decision right there, if only because it meant that he actually had to think ahead, something that he could do, but it was never his strong suit, even now. Some bad habits were hard to break.

His desk was still in the same, messy shape it was in when he left the previous afternoon. Going around, he even noticed that his computer was still on. He thought that it was supposed to go to sleep, but that's what someone else told him. He sat down and sighed a long, drawn out sigh. Time to get back to work. He'd dreaded the fact all the way back from the hospital. He may have been busy, but he had a job to do. More importantly, nothing was going to change about his decision. Despite being chewed out on it, no one said that he shouldn't end chunin and genin missions, just that he hadn't thought it through. Well, now he had thought it over, and he still saw no benefit in suspending those missions. Even Sakura and Hinata agreed.

He pulled up a word document on his desktop and went to work. This time, he thought his words over. Yes, it was strange that they would get worked up over the timing, but perhaps there was something more at play. As Sakura pointed out, they were fed to a machine that gave no care to children's well-being. He knew the system itself would resist his attempts at reform, and it had. But now was a good time to start. He started off just by writing down the facts of the attack; that several rogue ninjas had attacked a group of genin (he did not specify that his son was involved) and until there was no threat, chunin and genin missions were to be suspended indefinitely.

Chunin and genin already out it the field would be brought back. Then they were to take classroom courses until further notice.

Having kids go back to school actually sounded like a good idea on second thought.

He was almost finished with the order when Shikamaru entered his office. He had some more documents on him that he dropped on the desk, making Naruto sigh. "Sorry."

"I have enough to do!" Naruto moaned.

"Like what?"

"New order; I'm ending chunin and genin missions for now."

"Are you CRAZY!?" Shikamaru shouted, slamming his hands on the desk. "I mean, crazi er ?"

"Look, I just got chewed out about this a few minutes ago, but I'm not changing my mind," Naruto replied, resuming his typing.

"Chewed out about what?" Shikamaru asked. Naruto recounted the visit to the hospital, why he was doing this and what he was doing. And his only complaint was their complaint about the timing of his decision. "And there's no way to stop you?"

"Nope!"

"And you're putting the kids in classrooms?"

"Everyone already has the option to continue their schooling," said Naruto. "I think we could expand that."

"And what if the Council and other Clans try to stop you?"

"Then I can convince them to go along with it," Naruto answered. "We've got a lot of work to do, Shikamaru. I've put these reforms off too long. The system is going to change!"

In which Sakura channels Dr Cox from *Scrubs* .

Okay guys, I'm REALLY sorry this took so long to get done. But life, writer's block and other writing projects kinda got in the way. And I kinda kept procrastinating. Sorry about that.

I really appreciate the readership and your reviews/comments, some of which I've taken to heart. Not the derogatory ones, those are bad. I really appreciate how everyone's stuck by me through all the bullshit, even the shit I've put you through.

Chapter 14

Thanks to the skilled doctors and nurses, and his own efforts, Boruto was able to sit up after two days, and released from the hospital after 5. Everyone applauded him for his early release from the hospital. It still hurt him to sit up for extended time, but the said nurses and doctors were confident that he was well on his way to an inevitable full recovery.

But his demeanor had changed a little since Sakura slapped him. Immediately after she'd left, he'd quieted down as if she'd used her chakra to change his demeanor, but the other doctors and nurses found no such evidence. The obvious answer? He was still in shock from the slap. His refusal to mention it seemed to confirm everyone's suspicions. At first, no one noticed that his demeanor had changed, because it looked like he was so caught up in the physical therapy that it looked like he was focused on it. That might have been the case, at least partially.

He didn't react when the doctors told him that he was going home on that 5th day. He did co-operate with them as they helped him out of bed and into the wheelchair. He put on a brave face as he was wheeled out of his room and down to the lobby where his family, teammates and friends were waiting for him. As he'd done previously, he glared at his father and at Sakura. The latter action seemed to be another confirmation that his demeanor was because of Sakura. At least that's what Naruto, Sakura and Sarada thought while watching it. Since Boruto was happy to see Mitsuki again, it only made sense when he smiled at the sight of Mitsuki.

They whisked him out of the hospital as quietly and discreetly as possible. Boruto's attack was slightly-old news, giving them the slight advantage. A specially-customized rickshaw had rolled up next to the hospital for them to lay Boruto in; it was attached to a cart flatbed that Boruto had to be gently eased and secured into. Once he was secured in the flatbed, with Sarada, Mitsuki and Konohamaru with

him, the rickshaw driver departed the hospital en route to the Hokage residence. Naruto and Hinata sat in front of the flatbed and behind the driver. They had a clear view of Boruto. Sakura left several minutes before the family left so she could oversee the preparations at the Hokage residence.

Hinata reached out and took Boruto's hand-his arms weren't restrained-and squeezed. Naruto tried to do the same thing, but Boruto refused to even look at him. Naruto sighed, hung his head and turned around with his eyes downcast. Hinata rested her hand on his shoulder. He appreciated the gesture, but didn't get his heart racing. Hence why they were going to divorce that he couldn't tell Boruto and Himawari about just yet. He sighed, dreading Boruto's inevitable second outburst. Boruto was going to hate him even more now, and it tempted him to get it over with and tell him right now. He wouldn't have been able to, anyway; Team Konohamaru was already engrossed in their own conversation when he turned behind him to look.

"I hope you're still not angry," Boruto," Konohamaru remarked, chewing on a toothpick and pulling his legs up to his chest so Boruto could have more room.

"Stoooooop," Boruto groaned.

"How's your back?" Mitsuki asked.

"It still hurts."

"Do you want me to rub it?" Mitsuki's arm stretched out, but Sarada smacked his hand away.

"Come on, he doesn't need *that*," she scolded him, even pointing at Boruto's blank expression.

"I was trying to help," Mitsuki answered.

"I think he's still mad from getting slapped by my mom," said Sarada.

"I still can't believe she did that," said Konohamaru, " *And* she yelled at everyone."

"She hasn't stopped apologizing for that and I don't think she'll stop," said Sarada. "To your mom, that is." She looked down at Boruto. He was indeed angry. Again, everyone's suspicions seemed to be confirmed.

"By the way, why isn't she with us right now?" Konohamaru asked. "I thought today was her day off?"

"She went straight to the Hokage's residence," Sarada answered. "I'm sure she'll give you lots and lots of *motherly care* ." She bobbed her head from side to side while using an annoyed voice.

"C'mon, Sarada, don't be rude like that," said Konohamaru. "Lord Hiashi, Lady Hanabi and everyone else will be there."

"I can't wait to see grandpa," Boruto said, instantly brightening up.

"You're lucky your grandpa likes seeing you," Sarada lamented. "I once heard my grandpa saying that he couldn't separate me from my dad."

"Sasuke did great things, but a lot of them were terrible," said Konohamaru. "The law might have forgiven him, but I doubt the village has."

"But I'm not my dad," Sarada quietly said, pulling *her* knees up to her chest. Boruto groaned. This was supposed to be about *him*, not Sarada.

Naruto had been listening as intently as he could, and his chest had tightened when Boruto casually mentioned his grandfather. Such a doting grandfather would doubtlessly take news of the divorce hard. Naruto immediately dreaded their inevitable meeting to discuss the divorce and the custody situation. This might or might not have been mentioned earlier, but it bears repeating regardless, but he knew

what he was getting into when he married into the Hyuga clan. Now, he knew that he'd made a huge mistake marrying Hinata-again, a fact that bears repeating-and he would face the consequences if there were any. He wasn't afraid of being knocked off-the Hyuga weren't a yakuza, after all-but any attempts at reform weren't going to go anywhere if he was deposed as the Hokage, thanks to Hiashi's influence.

Of course, he still imagined Hiashi as a yakuza, tattoos and all. " *I'll teach ya a lesson for hurtin' my daughter and grandkids, dattebayo!*" Naruto cringed. Why did imaginary Hiashi steal his catchphrase!?

"What are you thinking about?" Hinata asked, bringing him back to the present.

"Hiashi," he admitted.

"Oh," she said quietly. Now he wasn't the only one concerned about Hiashi.

Hinata did not look forward to breaking the divorce news to Hiashi, either. Unlike him, she didn't worry about him killing her. She did worry that Hiashi would disown her, even though that was the worst, worst-case scenario. He would no doubt be devastated, unable to handle not seeing his grandkids. That was easy to remedy. No, the real fear was what they might do with Himawari. She had the Byakugan. Would they take her away from her? No, that wasn't going to happen, she was sure of it. But she feared she would be branded and forced to serve on Hanabi's behest. Naruto was right to criticize the clan's branch system. She would do anything in her power to save Himawari from a cruel fate.

Hinata turned and whispered to Naruto, "What should we tell him?"

"That it didn't work out?"

"I'm worried about Himawari," she said. "I don't want her to be taken away."

Naruto sighed. He obviously hadn't thought about it. But now he did think about it, and he decided he was going to rip at least one bandage off. "Next chance I get, I'll discuss the divorce with Hiashi. And tell him to end the branch system."

"Well, at least we won't have to put up a front anymore," she remarked, causing him to chuckle.

"What are you guys talking about?" Sarada asked.

"Oh, uh, nothing!" Naruto sputtered.

"Really? Nothing?" Sarada asked skeptically.

"What were they talking about!?" Boruto asked.

"Probably getting a divorce because they hate you," Sarada said.

"Don't you dare say that, young lady!" Hinata snapped, spinning around.

"Who are you, my mom!?" Sarada asked.

"No, but since your mother slapped my son yesterday, I'm returning the favor!"

"Ouch," Boruto laughed. "She *never* snaps at anyone!"

"Shut up," Sarada growled through grit teeth.

A large banner reading "Welcome home, Boruto" hung over the gate of the Hokage residence. Sakura sized it up and smiled, satisfied. Choji and Sai climbed down from the ladders to hi-five each other for a job well down, then took the ladders down while Sakura applauded them. "Great work, you two!" she said. Then she returned inside the residence gate with both men in tow. The man of the hour was due back within ten minutes, and Sakura had just returned. "Come on, hurry up!" she said. "I have to see how everything's going!"

Inside, everything seemed to be in good shape upon first impression. The welcome-back party had already unofficially begun, as evidenced by the conversations that had begun to bleed together by virtue of so many people already being there. The snacks were out on the table, and some guests had already started working on them. Sakura smiled. Presents were laid out on the table beside the snack table, piled up two high, all brought in by the kids at the Academy, and the sympathy cards were laid out next to them. Sakura felt a little useless, since everything had gone well without her presence, even though she planned almost everything. Feelings of her own uselessness going back to her childhood interrupted her thoughts, forcing her to push it aside.

"Okay, everyone!" she called. "The man of the hour should be here soon!" The guests cheered, which was a relief to Sakura, as she worried the guests would ignore her. Perhaps she was still coming off the surprise of her sudden outburst in Boruto's hospital room-an action for which she had yet to fully apologize for, in her eyes-that she didn't think she really could take control of a situation. But she did remember that time she did such a thing, organizing an effort to heal Kankuro after Sasori poisoned him. Heck, she organized this party!

She took a deep breath. She couldn't simply rest on her laurels here. She took a deep breath and announced, "Alright, listen up!" Everyone paused their conversation to look at Sakura. Worried they'd go right back to whatever it was they were doing, she continued. "Remember, this is a *welcoming* party, which means everyone needs to get into position, ready to greet Boruto as soon as he enters!"

"How are we going to do that?" a voice asked. It sounded like Chocho.

"The kids will greet Boruto outside," Sakura announced. Nobody moved. "What are you guys waiting for? Get moving!"

"You heard her!" Sumire Kakei cried. "Let's go!" She got up and ran out first, and the rest of the kids followed. Sighing in relief, Sakura turned to the adults.

"All of you! I need you to be ready to help Boruto out if he needs any help!" she ordered.

"Well, none of us can lift a wheelchair with our minds," said Ino, "If that's what you were thinking about."

Sakura raised her eyebrow at her friend and employer. "I'm not asking you to do too much, or give him special treatment," she said. "Just try to help him if he needs it."

"But you once said he was spoiled," said Sai.

Again, Sakura raised an eyebrow, but at Sai this time. "In my experience, many things can be true at the same time," she said. "Boruto is both a spoiled brat, but also doesn't like getting special treatment."

"He'll get plenty of special treatment from me!" Hiashi declared.

"I do expect it from his grandfather," she remarked. Any attempt to stop him immediately fell on deaf ears, as she expected.

The large banner was visible. Visibly relieved, Hinata cried out and almost stood up in the rickshaw cab, only to be held down by her seatbelt. Turning around, she said to Boruto, "We're-you're-almost home!" The relieved smile on Boruto's lips lifted her spirits, and so did his teammates' smiles. Naruto started to turn to speak to Boruto, faltered, and stayed put in his space. He could read the room enough to sadly know that Boruto was still angry at him and was going to remain angry until he either forgave him, got sick of being angry at him, or was called out on his stubbornness. The weeklong ordeal was almost over, thank the gods. Another difficult road was ahead. But for now, they could celebrate.

They passed under the gate, and as soon as they did, Boruto's friends/classmates and grandfather ran over to the rickshaw, surrounding it from a safe distance, but Himawari was the one to jump into the rickshaw herself. Sitting up, but in visible pain, Boruto hugged her tightly for several minutes. Then Sarada and Mitsuki undid the straps keeping the stretcher in place in the rickshaw flatbed, lifted the stretcher up and took him off the bed. The gathered crowd cheered as he was finally carried back into the house, surrounded by the kids. Hinata and Naruto brought up the rear.

The moment he entered the house, the gathered crowd cheered for him. He weakly raised his hand and then lowered it when he was set down on the floor. With the help of a pair of orderlies, he was released from the stretcher, sat up and stood up, albeit with Sarada and Mitsuki's help. Again, everyone cheered for him as he was led to the couch to sit down.

Hiashi and his wife were the first to come up and greet Boruto. They didn't smother him right away, but they did help him onto his back, held his hand and told him they were proud of him. Then they gave him a cool toy that he was likely going to forget when he got older, but was the coolest thing right now, a Gutsy Ninja drama action figure. Naruto, having sat down across from him, visibly but subtly squirmed. Boruto's grandmother kissed his forehead, then turned to Sakura and bowed deeply to the doctor, with Hiashi doing the same thing. Sakura blushed and returned the bow. It made Naruto laugh and his heart skip a little beat.

Freyja, the Fjordlandic woman who, alongside her native-born husband, owned the farm Boruto had worked at, was next. She gave him two presents; a wood-carved toy longship, and an effigy of Eir, her peoples' goddess of healing.

"Just pray to Eir, and she'll help the healing," she said jovially at first, then realized she may have accidentally offended the doctor in the room. "No offense meant to the doctor."

"No offense taken," Sakura answered. "Please don't run me through with a sword." Years ago, Freyja's people were feared all over the globe, even in the Five Nations, as sea-faring raiders. Their reputation for violence, brutality and plundering was well-earned. But as everyone could see, they had chanced. They were still a sea-faring people, but now they traded instead of plundered. Freyja herself came with a trading party and stayed so she could marry her husband. Freyja looked up at Sakura, displaying the same fierce look in her eyes that terrified people all over the globe. Sakura tensed up, but kept an awkward smile.

Then Freyja's expression softened. "I was just kidding."

"Oh," Sakura said, relieved.

"But I was a shieldmaiden once," Freyja added. "Perhaps I could show you some ropes."

Strange grammar aside, a thought popped in Naruto's head. He'd already asked Freyja about her people's army. What if...

There were no more gifts from the adults, but the kids crowded around Boruto. Freyja stood up and backed out of the way, into Sakura. But only gently. She apologized, Sakura accepted the apology. Then Freyja turned, walked over to Naruto and Hinata and offered the blessings of her gods, the Æsir. Her offer was accepted, but only slightly awkwardly from Naruto and Hinata.

When Hinata, Freyja and most of the other adults weren't looking, Naruto and Sakura exchanged a long, soft, fond gaze. They didn't question why they gazed at each other this way, but that's because they gazed that way automatically, the same way they had gazed at each other years ago in Team 7, before Naruto convinced himself that he was in love with Hinata. Finally, Sakura broke her end of the gaze when Sarada came up to her. Her expression became serious and then finally awkward, which meant that she must have realized something. What did she realize? Naruto awkwardly averted his gaze, turning back to Boruto, who was happily surrounded by his

best friends. Then a blur of pink rushed towards them, and Sakura's sudden bow caught them off guard.

"I just remembered, please forgive me for my rudeness the other day!" she huffed. "It was not my place to order either of you around, nor was it my place to slap Boruto. I'm really sorry!"

Naruto and Hinata were temporarily silent, but Hinata broke it by chuckling haughtily with a hand over her mouth. "I forgive you," she said. "I appreciate everything you did for Boruto, and for my husband."

"Is that the only reason?" Sakura asked.

"No," Hinata answered. "But I want to be friends with you." She held her hand out to shake. Curious as to where this new Hinata came from, Sakura stared at the hand, back to Hinata and back to the hand. Finally, she shook Hinata's hand. But she also glanced aside at Naruto, telegraphing to him that she was confused about the situation. Naruto shrugged.

"Can I talk to you?" Naruto whispered to her, "Alone?"

"Why?" Sakura asked. "You're not in love with me, are you?"

"No," he said. "I just need to be honest with you about something."

He led her into the hallway, out of earshot. His demeanor changed immediately from his visible relief at seeing his son return home, to a new burden. Sakura also became concerned, for him, as he was obviously about to tell her that something big was going to happen. She mentally braced herself for whatever it was he was about to say.

"I haven't told anyone about this yet," he started, crossing his arms, leaning against the wall and looking up at the ceiling. "But when Boruto was attacked, and Hinata and I were in marriage counselling, I had a realization; that I never really loved Hinata. I was lying to myself about it."

Sakura was flabbergasted by his confession.

"I didn't want to admit it, but I couldn't keep lying to myself," he continued, "Not when I'm in a rut or... something. All I know is, I'm just *tired* of living a lie, and I want it to stop."

"What are you saying?"

"Hinata and I agreed to getting divorced."

"ARE YOU C-" Sakura smacked her hands over her mouth before she could disrupt the party. "Are you *crazy* !?" she stage-whispered. "I know you don't think things through, but this takes the cake!"

"I know, I know!" he answered. "We won't tell the kids about it until we think it's the right time, and we're going to ease into it!"

Sakura paused and sighed. "Well, at least you thought *that* out."

"I'm sorry I picked a bad time to tell you," he said, "But I'd rather get it over with."

"You really have changed," she said. "This new apologetic you doesn't seem like you at all."

"I've had a rough month," he said. "But it's already too late. Hinata and I have already started the paperwork."

"I guess that part hasn't changed," she said. "You're so stubborn."

"Yeah, I know," he sheepishly laughed, grinning his wide, toothy grin of pure sunshine that made her heart skip a beat.

"You're still an idiot," she huffed.

"Guilty as charged."

"And then what?" she asked.

"Well, I still have to finish changing the ninja system," he mused. "I don't know how far I'll get in that."

"Because the powers that be have a vested interest in keeping it intact," she sighed. "You and I are just two victims, and the latest victim is sitting on your couch with a broken back."

"Yeah," he said.

"You really think this is the best course of action?" she asked.

"Yeah," he repeated. "I hate people who lie to themselves. If my younger self saw me, he'd hate me more than I already do."

"Don't hate yourself," Sakura said. "Everybody makes mistakes, even if we have to lie to ourselves... actually, I think you do have good reason to be mad at yourself." She took a deep breath and sighed. They did that a lot these days. For a moment, she thought about Sasuke and a couple questions popped into her mind. She sighed again to force them out.

But Naruto managed to catch her subtly and faintly furrowing her eyebrows, piquing his curiosity. "Is something wrong?"

"Everything's fine," she said. "I'm going to go on TV soon to talk about what happened to Boruto. I think I'll bring up the situation at the hospital."

"I could help."

"It's fine," she said. "The doctor's still a jerk."

"And your house?"

"Naruto, I don't need your help there," she insisted.

"I know you said that, but *please* . There's got to be something I can do."

"You're busy with your personal life and the village," she said, "I don't need you to get distracted. I'll be fine."

No, you won't, he thought. "Have you talked to Sasuke yet?"

She sighed and cleared her throat. "I'm sure he's busy, whatever he's doing. I don't want to be a burden to him."

Was there a point to this conversation? both of them wondered at the same time, a pure coincidence. Surely there had to be something. Still, Sakura gazed at Naruto. He held himself as the troubled, but still determined man he was presenting himself as, his hands in his pocket and keeping watch over Boruto. She wanted him to be happy. He deserved happiness. But he wasn't. But if he could try to fix his life, so could she. She was already taking some steps herself, so if he could do it, she could do it.

She stepped forward, opening her arms to him. He accepted her gesture, wrapping his arms around her and squeezing tightly. It felt like home.

Perhaps they could have made their current lives work somehow, but this isn't that timeline. But perhaps there was still some hope for their futures, if they worked to make those futures happen. Then they could find the happy endings they dreamed about when they were younger. They'd both made the wrong choices somewhere along the line, but there was no specific choice that brought them here. They had simply made choices that seemed like good ideas at the time or didn't take the correct action when they should have. Everyone makes mistakes. Hey, they're only human. "What was I thinking?" is practically a species-wide catchphrase (except for people who lack self-awareness or refuse to self-reflect, but that's a different topic for another day).

But maybe once hindsight set in, they would learn that the questions, solutions and answers were right in front of them the whole time, but they didn't want to admit it because they either wanted to stay the course, thus compounding their mistakes, or they subconsciously

knew why but it was so obvious that they couldn't believe it. It's like coming across a deceptively easy question on a test and you think that the answer couldn't *possibly* be the obvious one, or a just-as-deceptively-easy task where you think and insist that the only way to do it the hard way. And in the end, you were marked wrong on the test and the task kept being done wrong.

For Naruto, he was on the path to realization. Sakura needed to figure it out.

They broke their hug and returned to the party.

Boruto was relieved to finally be back in his own room, in his own bed, away from well-wishers. You get tired of them after a while and you just want to get back to normalcy. His injured back would keep that from happening any time soon. He was going to have to put up with it, have to work to get himself back into shape and back into action, but his ninja career was already over, no thanks to his dad. He didn't even talk to him, nor Dr. Uchiha, while he lay on the couch downstairs. If people were going to accuse him of being a brat, he was going to prove them right (although that also was only near-term). He was just relieved to finally get this stupid ordeal over with. It felt like it had dragged on longer than it should have. He just wanted to be left alone right now.

Being left alone did not mean being in his room and surrounded by Himawari, Mitsuki and Sarada. Okay, Himawari and Mitsuki were good companions, but Sarada was not. She was only there to be a little wise-ass and get her teasing in while she still had the chance, Boruto concluded. Who did she think she was, his sister? She might not have said anything yet-she spent most of her time in his room examining her fingernails-but he wasn't fooled! She didn't even need to be there, so the only explanation for her presence was to torment him.

Sarada looked up from her nails and looked at him as if she was daring him to say what was on his mind, in his perspective. He didn't

say anything, thereby not giving her the satisfaction. That annoyed sigh and headshake wasn't going to fool him into thinking that she was just there because she could be!

"Are you sure you don't need a back rub?" Mitsuki cut in, his arm extending to the bed.

"Knock it off, Mitsuki, you're creeping me out," Sarada scolded him.

"What else can you extend?" Himawari inquired.

"Great," Sarada sighed. So did Boruto. Already things were going downhill and he hadn't said anything. Was it a metaphor for how his life had also gone downhill this past week? No, but it was annoying anyway.

"Will you stop?" he asked.

"Stop what?" Sarada asked.

"... Never mind."

"Yeah, I thought so," Sarada huffed. "If only he broke your jaw."

"Sarada, that's not very nice!" Himawari objected.

"Sorry. But I'll make do with my mom slapping you." She turned and slyly grinned at Boruto.

"Don't remind me!" Boruto snapped.

"Sorry, but you deserved it," Sarada teased.

"Yeah, I kinda agree with her," Himawari said softly. Sarada grinned at Himawari and the two young women fist-bumped. "Sorry you have to put up with him. He's dumb, isn't he?"

"Oh, yeah," said Sarada.

"Mitsukiiiiii, help me out here!" Boruto moaned.

"With what?" Mitsuki asked. Boruto groaned.

"Why have all my friends turned against me?"

"Like I said; you're a spoiled brat," said Sarada. "Your mom went too easy on you and your dad let her go too easy on you."

"And *your* dad hates your mom!" Boruto snapped.

"You take that back!"

"Remember that time you thought that Karin woman was your real mom!?" Boruto snapped again.

"What does that have to do with anything!?"

"You hate your mom!"

"Oh yeah? Well *your* parents are getting divorced!"

" *WHAT!?* "

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry!" Sarada apologized. "I can't prove it."

"Then why'd you say it?"

"Have you *seen* the way they act around each other?" Sarada asked. "They don't act like a married couple."

"That's because you don't know how married couples are supposed to act," Boruto countered. Sarada wanted to reply, but didn't have a comeback.

"And how do *you* know how married couples act?" she finally asked after a good long minute. Boruto too had to concede... for a second.

"They act like my mom and dad," he answered.

"Are you sure?"

"Positive! Besides, you can't tell if they're actually getting a divorce!"

"They're getting divorced."

"Nuh-uh!"

"Yes, huh!"

"Sarada, please," Himawari begged, "I don't want my mommy and daddy to divorce!"

Sarada sighed. "I know, I know, I can't prove it. I'm just messing with Boruto."

"I wanna mess with him too, but please stop saying that?"

"Okay," said Sarada. As accidentally correct she was, she was going overboard with the teasing. It's a difficult subject for any kid. Luckily, Sarada had a fallback plan to mess with him. "Say, Himawari, wanna draw on his toys?"

"Sure!" Both girls hopped off Boruto's bed while he shouted at them.

Ugh. I'm FINALLY done with this arc!

Thanks for sticking with me, guys, even if you have a few complaints about where I'm going. To be honest, I didn't think this was going to drag on like it did, but now that I'm finally done with this arc, I can get back to more of what I wanted to do. Now I just need to stay motivated, which will be the real problem. Also, I hope I can find some time in my busy schedule to work on this. Don't worry, I know where I'm going.

Please, tell me how I'm doing!

Chapter 15

The morning came early as it usually did to the small farming village. The sun began rising early in the Hour of the Rabbit, the first rays of light brightening the horizon in the east. First it shone on the farm fields surrounding the village, reflecting in the water in the rice paddies, its reflection long and shortening as it rose in the sky. Those rice farmers would probably be the first to awake. Since it was at the height of summer, they weren't going to harvest their rice until the autumn. But there were other farms in this area that grew other crops. Some of those crops were ready to be harvested, some not. But wheat was in the middle of its harvesting season; more than a few wheat fields had already been cleared, some were still in the process of harvesting.

The village itself was a small, simple village that, not counting the farms surrounding it, only took up a single crossroad of old, traditional wood-frame buildings packed together in an area of less than ten square kilometers. But it was still a regional hub for the farmers to gather, sell their stock and wares, hire new farmhands, etc. It just wasn't a major hub like Konohagakure, or the nation's capital. Soon the streets would be filled with people. Carts would line both streets and the air would be filled with shouting and singing.

Ryu, the farmer who had employed Boruto's team, gradually woke up from a good, dreamless sleep. He started stirring as the sunlight slowly filtered in through the window of his upper-story inn room. He moaned and turned away from the window, lingering in that position for several minutes. But his farmer's instinct roused him. Soon, he could no longer stay asleep, so he sat up in bed, completely wide awake. He was here in town to hire some new farmhands, since Boruto's team's mission abruptly ended with the attack, the Hokage's decision to end chunin and genin missions partly responsible, but a reaction to the attack, nonetheless. He *could* have cursed the Hokage for that, buuuuuuuuuut he understood the position the Hokage was in and could only curse the position he was in.

He slipped out of his futon, only wearing a fudanshi, and walked about the room, rousing the three farmhands accompanying him on this trip. "Come on, get up!" he barked, lightly kicking their feet under their covers. They too woke up, just not willingly, while he donned his clothes and tied his hair up in a topknot. Hands on his hips, he watched them slowly and reluctantly get out of bed, acting like their futons were two meters off the ground. Or to be more accurate, as if they were willingly trapped in their covers. For all the effort he had put into instilling a work ethic into Boruto Uzumaki (the reason why his father had sent him and his friends to his farm), his farmhands-recent hires, actually-were just as slow to adopt the work ethic as Boruto seemed to be. He did not see this as a failure on his part. In fact, it was a challenge. There's a reason the Hokage reached out to him to instill that work ethic in his son.

"Move it! We're not on holiday!" he barked again. Still not satisfied with their movements, he used a time-held motivational technique; "They're making breakfast soon. And if you don't get up, you can't have breakfast!" He was lying. But since it got them up and out of bed in an instant, who cared?

(His farmhands when they found out he was lying, but he didn't let it get to him)

As miffed as they were that their employer lied to them about breakfast, food took their minds off it immediately. They chowed down on white rice, miso soup, egg and bacon, all of which were prepared by the inn's owner's wife... and some more employees. They seemed to be happy to be working for him, unlike the farmhands... Ryu noticed their envious stares and returned them with a glare, causing them to shrink from his gaze. The innkeeper's wife caught a glimpse of their envious staring and nodded her head at Ryu, a nod he returned, one employer to another. Behind their back, however, the innkeeper's staff gave the farmhands glances of worker's solidarity, ready to seize the means of production one day.

Anyway.

They took their time with breakfast and the inn's restaurant filled up with travelers. They were either farmers looking to hire hands like Ryu and his hands or travelers stopping by for a night or more. The din of the busy restaurant drowned out their conversation, which to be fair, was a mundane conversation, with mundane topics, just like the rest of the conversations in the room. Ryu did discuss Boruto's recovery, annoying some of them, except for Yusuke. Freyja had once yelled at him and threatened to punish him because he kept teasing Boruto.

At Ryu's insistence, they finished their breakfast quicker than they had originally intended, only for them to realize that they had spent longer having breakfast than they realized. Overhearing someone talk about a visitor with a loud voice was what first clued them in, followed by looking around. They could already hear the hustle and bustle out in the street, the village's population temporarily swelling with the aforementioned-visitors. Ryu and his farmhands would join them on the street when they were finished with breakfast.

Speaking of which, they finished their breakfast because the restaurant was getting crowded. Well, one farmhand lingered to shovel some rice into his maw, then hurried out, almost bumping into a little kid leaning back to talk to some kid he met last night. The farmhand didn't even stop to apologize, but he did apologize and keep going. His co-workers all shook their heads collectively.

They returned to their room for half an hour to discuss some minor topics, then left their room and the inn to begin their employee search.

The street was bustling. The mid-morning crowds packed the streets, making them look like the busiest city streets. The crowds were thick, but a little thin in the middle, but thicker along the buildings. About 20 people thick in some places crowded around a series of stalls where the farmers hawked their wares. The most popular of these stalls was a rice stand, next to a melon stand, which was the second most popular stand, thanks to spillover from the rice stand. The man attending the stall wasn't complaining that he was

getting spill over from the most popular stand, not a bit. The same couldn't be said of a cabbage merchant and his cart across the street. Worse for him, the cabbage merchant, some kids were running down the street towards him.

Noticing the kids approaching, the cabbage merchant jumped in front of his cart, fear in his eyes, until the kids were safely past him. He sighed in relief. Ryu and his employees watched from the inn's entrance on the opposite side of the street from the cabbage merchant, amused. Just amused. Ryu was in no hurry to get his farmhands moving, but he was a little annoyed that they were all but gawking at the cabbage merchant. Clearing his throat, he gestured to them to focus on their task at hand.

But as much as Ryu wanted to hurry the recruiting process as fast as he could, he couldn't rush it. He was looking for a good employee, which he could certainly miss out on if he didn't act quickly, but he could just as easily end up with a bad employee instead. He did come prepared with a series of relevant interview questions, however; 'Do you have relevant experience in the position we're hiring for?' 'Are you willing to work from sunrise to sunset?' 'Have you ever worked in animal husbandry?' 'My wife used to be a Fjordlandic shieldmaiden. Are you afraid of strong women?' That last one was not on the interview sheet, but Ryu planned to ask it, anyway, because any farmhand who was didn't want to work for a strong woman would make a terrible farmhand. His current employees *were* afraid of Freyja, but their fear was out of respect, so that was different. And yes, he did plan to follow it up with that fact.

"Gentlemen," he said, "Do you know what to do?"

"Find a willing farmhand?" Yusuke asked.

"Of course, but how do you *find* someone who's looking for work?"

The farmhands looked and talked amongst themselves. Ryu rolled his eyes. These young men needed to learn more about recruiting. So, he decided to give them a little nudge. "Let's look around," he

said. "I mean from here, just observe the crowds. Ignore the people looking to buy the products."

He gestured at the crowds. His farmhands followed. They watched the people, filtering out the visitors who were looking to buy products; there were *plenty* of those, but they were easy to spot. They usually lingered at the food or product stalls. That left the people walking around, turning their heads from side to side. "Ignore the ones without bags," said Ryu. "Those aren't the ones we're looking for." So they narrowed their search down to people who were carrying bags, looking around.

"That one!" a farmhand called, pointing at a man in the middle of the street carrying a bag over his right shoulder. His face was obscured by dark, spiky hair.

"Hmmm, I suppose," said Ryu. He whistled. His whistle caught the man's attention and he waved him over to him. The man walked over to them. "Looking for work?" he asked. If there was anything that could narrow the search down, this was it. If this search didn't work, they did have a sign announcing that they were hiring. But this was good practice.

"Yes," he answered.

"Good," said Ryu. "Full-time or temporary?" he pulled out a clipboard and a pen.

"Temporary," he said. "I'm a traveler, but I don't have a lot of money."

"We can fit in a temporary worker," said Ryu. "First, let me introduce myself; my name is Ryu, and I own a farm outside Konohagakure. We recently had some personnel issues, and we need to find some new farmhands. Right now I'm showing my employees how to conduct a recruiting process. Now then, let's get into it; what is your experience in farming?"

"I don't have a lot," the traveler answered, "But I can learn."

"Ah, I like to hear that," said Ryu. "Have you ever done physical labor?"

"Yes, I have," the traveler answered. "But it's not easy; I only have one arm."

"We can accommodate," said Ryu. "We're mainly looking for someone to carry haybales. I assume that won't be an issue?"

"Of course not," the man answered.

"Like I said, we can accommodate," said Ryu. "Are you willing to work from sunrise to sunset?"

"Of course."

"That's good to know," Ryu said, jotting down his answer. "You know, one of our recent volunteers had a bit of a problem with their work ethic. They grew up in privilege and didn't like manual labor, so they complained a lot. Granted, they were young, this was their first real job and we wanted to instill a work ethic in him. How would you describe your work ethic?"

"I would describe it as strong," the man answered. "I've worked a lot in my life, sometimes to the breaking point, but I've been trying to get myself stronger by working. I did used to be a ninja, so that's a plus."

"That *is* a plus," Ryu jotted down. "We just arrived yesterday-"

"So did I."

"Good to know. Anyway, we just arrived yesterday, so we're still looking. Anyway, my wife is Fjordlandic and she used to be a shieldmaiden. Are you afraid of strong women?"

Ryu looked up and saw that the man had frozen in his place, staring at Ryu as if he either didn't understand him or he had non-verbally answered the question. "These men are afraid of my wife, but out of respect. Sorry, it's just a question I ask everyone."

"I understand," said the man. "And no, I am not afraid of strong women."

"Good. Do you have any questions?"

"What's a typical day like?"

Ryu explained what a typical day was like. The man seemed intrigued. Then he finished. "Oh, I'm sorry, I forgot to ask your name. What is it?"

"Sasuke Uchiha."

Ryu's blood froze. He looked up. He didn't realize he had been speaking to the monster this whole time. However, he put on a professional face and nodded. "Well, thank you for speaking with me, Uchiha-san. I'll be in touch. I assume you have a phone?"

"Of course I do." Uchiha gave him his phone number. "I am on my way to Konohagakure right now."

"Good to know," Ryu said, bowing. Uchiha left, leaving Ryu behind. He already knew he wasn't going to hire him, simply on a count of his actions. Overthrowing the already-awful ninja system to become the all-powerful tyrannical dictator, starting the Last Great Ninja War, killing people left and right and generally being an awful person? Most importantly, any man who feared a strong woman, but did not respect her, was a weakling. He didn't need that for an employee.

There were better prospective employees in town, anyway.

Naruto's alarm clock blared. Annoyed, he threw his arm out and smacked the "snooze" button. He would've kept sleeping, but a glance at the clock caused him to slide out of bed. He yawned and looked behind him. The covers on the other side of the bed were tossed aside. His wife got out of bed before he did. He could smell the breakfast cooking from the other room and his kids shouting,

excited. Wanting to join them, he stood up and put a shirt on. His arm underneath the bandages itched, so he scratched it. He heard his wife declaring that breakfast was almost ready, so he fluffed his hair and walked out the door.

"Mooooom!" he heard his son call.

"Be nice to your sister!" his wife answered. "In my experience any man who's afraid of a strong woman but doesn't respect her is weak."

Her chastising made him chuckle. He didn't fear strong women. In fact, that's one of the many things he loved about her. Since they grew up in a time of war, he got to see her grow so much, becoming stronger every day. He couldn't imagine himself marrying someone else.

"Your mother's right!" he called out. He entered the kitchen, ruffled his son's hair and walked over to, and hugged his wife.

"Thank you, dear," she said.

"You're welcome, Sakura."

Naruto forced himself to open his eyes and get out of bed.

Naruto *hated* those dreams. He hadn't had many since was 18; when he convinced himself to do his best to reciprocate Hinata's feelings for him. Those dreams occasionally popped up in sparse moments, but he always forgot them, like every other dream. He couldn't remember what exactly happened in this last dream, just that it happened. Some people would call the dreams "lovely". Those people didn't have to put up with them and accept the fact that, not only were they not real, they were a pain in the ass. He was still married to Hinata, but not for much longer; the process would gradually roll on until a specific set date, giving the couple and their

kids plenty of time to get used to it. And Sakura was still, and would remain, married to Sasuke. That train left the station a long time ago.

For now, he found it bitterly funny that this one part of his life was ending thanks to some dreams. But another dream just started the next part of his life. But today he had to meet with Hiashi Hyuga. He dreaded this meeting. In the meantime, he had to have breakfast. He got up out of bed and saw that Hinata was not in bed.

She was indeed making breakfast. At least that part of the dream was real. He told her about the dream... at least the part that he was married to another woman, just not Sakura. She was unhappy, but thanked him for being honest. Curiously, he thought he heard her mumble something about Sakura.

Across town, Sakura awoke from almost the exact same dream, but from her perspective. Alarmed instead of annoyed, she sat up in bed, panting, and tried to replay the dream over and over again in her mind. She had woken up to Naruto- *Naruto!* -making breakfast for her and they were *married* . *Happily married* , with a son and daughter. What were their names? She forgot, just like most of the details, except that she was happy in that dream, happier than she had been. *I already have a family!* She internally panicked, pulling her knees up to her chest. *What's this about? Why did I dream of Naruto? He's like my brother! Oh, for-calm down, Sakura! It's just a dream* . It couldn't get to her if she recognized that.

She needed to forget about the dream. To do so, she rolled over her schedule for the day. She remembered that she had a shift at the hospital. The Chief of Medicine was still being a stubborn git, refusing to give her full-time position back. That dream with Naruto was just that; a dream.

Refocused, she hopped out of bed so she could get ready for work.

Naruto's rickshaw pulled up in front of the Hyuuga estate. He stepped out, and two ANBU agents were at his side in a heartbeat,

followed by two Hyuuga attendants walking up to him.

"Welcome, Lord Hokage," said the attendant on the right. "Lord Hiashi is eager to meet you and hear news of his grandson."

"Thank you," said Naruto. "Please, take me to Lord Hiashi."

The attendants bowed, turned around and walked towards the estate's main entrance past the gate. Naruto waited until they were a few paces away before he followed. Approaching the entrance, some Hyuuga servants bowed to the Hokage, their heads almost touching their knees. There was a point where Naruto got used to this treatment from the rest of the village and may have let it get to his head a bit, but this was before Boruto was nearly crippled in that attack. It was still better than the shit he suffered from when he was a kid. Also, he mentally prepared for Hiashi to lash out and use that to keep Naruto married to Hinata. Hiashi wasn't *that* awful, right? Perhaps it was his anxiety that made him think that would happen. Of course, Naruto could always bring Neji and the branch house up and see where that went.

Naruto's heart beat a little faster. He had to calm himself by taking several deep breaths and reminding himself that Hiashi just assumed that this was a simple lunch meeting and didn't know about the divorce... *yet* . Then he remembered that he had to *tell* Hiashi about the divorce, and that scared him, too!

The butler met him at the front door, bowing. Then the butler spun around on his heel and walked down the main hall, but paused and waited for Naruto to remove his shoes and Hokage hat. The Hokage left them at the front. When Naruto was ready, the butler continued, Naruto following him. The butler led him past Hanabi's room and a training dojo, until he came to the room where Hiashi was waiting for him. Because he'd forgotten that Hiashi didn't know about the inevitable divorce, he was surprised when Hiashi stood up and hugged him. "Naruto, my dear boy!" the Hyuuga Lord declared, "How are you?"

"I'm... doing well," he said.

"Why are you still nervous to see me?" Hiashi asked. "Come, sit down! I have a good lunch for us planned!"

"Thank you," he said. They sat down across from each other. Hiashi was still smiling and, upon reading Hiashi's expression, Naruto could tell that his smile was genuine, but with a hint of worry behind it, although he was up front about his worry over Boruto. It just made the inevitable bad news all the harder to drop.

The butler, whom Naruto finally noticed at the mark of the Branch Family on his forehead, entered the room holding a bottle of sake and two drinking dishes. He placed both drinking dishes before both men, set the sake on the table and then served them both a shot each. "It's not often I get to have lunch with my son-in-law," said Hiashi. He raised his drinking dish in a toast. Naruto returned the gesture. "To... our health," he said.

"To our health," Naruto answered and drank with Hiashi.

The first course of lunch was served; white rice and miso soup. After both said, ' *Itadakimasu* ', Hiashi went for the soup first. "How is Boruto doing?" Hiashi asked.

"He's getting better," Naruto answered. "But it's going to be a while until he's able to re-start his ninja work... if he's able to."

"Ah, I heard of your plan," said Hiashi. His voice had turned more serious. "But I don't blame you. If I was in your position, I would have done the same thing."

Would he have done the same for Neji? Naruto thought. "Thank you for understanding." He ate a clump of white rice. It was nice and fluffy, just the way he liked it.

"You are welcome," said Hiashi. "You know, I could not help but notice that you're nervous. Please, no need to be so scared. We

know each other!"

"Yeah, we do," said Naruto.

"I see that look in your eyes," Hiashi said while pouring more sake in his saucer, "You're sad about what's going on. I understand. But, soon, things will go back to normal and you'll forget this even happened, and you'll restart the ninja program. It's in your nature."

Naruto clenched his fist under the table. Did Hiashi *really* know him? Granted, Naruto hadn't told him the full truth; that he was going to end many of these missions permanently. No. What truly angered Naruto was Hiashi's assumptions. Worse, did Hiashi assume that Naruto was just a lackey for the powers-that-be? For the landed gentry, the Konoha Council, for the very system that messed Naruto up, that he was finally going to change after waiting too damn long? Naruto didn't want to make any assumptions, either, but Hiashi had accidentally insulted him. He needed to know what Hiashi meant.

"Pardon me," he said, "But what did you mean by that?"

"I just meant things will go back to normal," Hiashi answered. "I apologize if I may have offended you in some way."

Okay, so maybe Hiashi didn't mean it *that* way. He couldn't tell if it was because of his anxiety or not. "It's okay," Naruto answered. "It's been a rough couple of weeks."

"Good thing you have Hinata by your side," said Hiashi, "As she as always been there. I remember when she told me that you didn't know what love actually was..."

Again, Hiashi's phrases were totally innocent, on account of him being locked out of the loop, but it still made Naruto flinchingly flex his fingers when he heard Hiashi ramble on about Hinata. Strangely, he focused on the part where Hiashi mentioned that he didn't know what love really was. Did he? Did he really? He wasn't sure. It felt like it didn't make sense when he remembered how he drove Zabuzza

to tears with his speech about how much Haku loved him, and the lengths Kushina went to protect him as a baby, getting killed in the process. A mother's love is clearly not the same as the love Hinata had for him, but now that he thought about it, maybe that's why he was so quick to "reciprocate" Hinata's feelings? Because she was supposedly the first person to show him romantic love or something? Well, it's obvious how it was working out.

"Naruto? Are you okay?"

Naruto snapped his head up to look at Hiashi. "I know you don't mean to be rude, but you have been rather... what's the term? Out of it today. Is something wrong?"

Deciding it was better to rip the bandage off, Naruto sucked in a breath and said, "Hinata and I are getting divorced."

Silence. Still holding a clump of rice in his chopsticks and a bowl in the other, Hiashi stared at Naruto, his mouth slightly open. The Branch House butler had frozen midstride while carrying more tea. Other servants working their duties stopped to stare at Naruto through the doors. Naruto's face turned hot. He really, *really* wanted to leave, he was so embarrassed, but that would be rude, even ruder than what he had just done; come into another man's house to tell him that he was divorcing his daughter. Oh boy, maybe he should've just called Hiashi to tell him instead of doing this. Great job, Naruto!

"I know what you're going to say about hospitality, so just skip to the next thing," Naruto said sheepishly.

"Were you not the Hokage, I would have thrown you out of my house," Hiashi said, clearly offended but trying to be the gracious host. "But since you are also struggling and you came here to tell me in person, I will hear you out."

Naruto sighed. "First, I sincerely apologize for any offense I have given you," he said, "And if I seemed like a terrible person."

"None taken."

"Thank you," said Naruto. He recounted, as best he could remember, how he felt prior, the dreams he had, the marriage counselling session where the counsellor had expressed amazement that it had gone on as long as it had, how, in a fit of emotion, he declared he wanted a divorce, then took a step back and calmly made his case for a divorce. Next, he described how he and Hinata had come to a mutual agreement to go ahead with the divorce, their plans and acknowledged that deciding on the divorce while Boruto was injured would likely hurt his relationship with Boruto and their custody plans. Unsurprisingly, that seemed to be the thing Hiashi was more concerned about.

"But please, tell me," he said, "Will I still be able to see my grandkids?"

"Of course," Naruto answered.

Hiashi sighed and clenched his face in happiness. "I'll be the best grandfather ever!" he cried. Then he became serious and stared at Naruto. "But I need to ask; was my daughter not good enough for you?"

"To be honest... no," Naruto answered. "I don't think she was the right person for me. I do wish that I had actually *thought* about what she meant to me, but... I'm just as much to blame for this as she is, maybe more so. I only agreed to it because, I guess you're right. I don't know what love actually is, and I just went with it."

Hiashi sighed. "That's a shame. My daughter was devoted to you."

"I hope she'll find someone that she needs," said Naruto, "But maybe she wasn't the person I needed."

"She could have been," said Hiashi, "had you actually *tried* to improve your relationship."

"Yeah, well, it's too late for that," said Naruto. "The marriage counselor said it was worse than an arranged marriage."

"And you just went with it?" Hiashi sputtered. "Did you even love my daughter at *all* ?"

"You know what, maybe I didn't!" Naruto replied. He sighed under Hiashi's softening scrutiny. "I mean, I did say that I only went along with it because she was nice to me. And... as much as I hate to say it... so I could become Hokage. I hate myself. I've lied to myself and I've become scum. It's for the best that I move on and find someone who really makes me happy. So should she. She's a very kind person, you know. She'll make someone happy."

Hiashi sighed. "So you're going through with this." He concluded. "But do you expect me to be your pity party?"

"No, I just needed to say something," said Naruto. "I don't know who I want. My mom, right before she died, told me I should find someone like her, and since Hinata's nothing like her, maybe that's it."

"Well that's great," Hiashi groaned. He leaned his head back, stared at the ceiling and sighed. "Very well, then. I won't try to stop you. You're dead set on this, and it'd be insane to pick a fight with the Hokage over something as meaningless as a divorce."

"Yeah," said Naruto. "Thank you. But you still hate me, don't you?"

"If you do hurt Hinata, I *won't* forgive you," Hiashi answered. "Speaking of... you're not changing your mind about the genin and chunin, either."

"No," Naruto answered. "I've put this off long enough. I hate to do it when my son is injured, but better late than never."

"And *how* will you do it?" Hiashi asked. "The Council will just overrule your orders."

"Not if I got to the daimyo!" Naruto countered. "I'm sure he'll side with me!"

"Well, you have a point," said Hiashi. "But the council-"

" *Hang* the council... figuratively, not literally," said Naruto.

"What? Are you going to dissolve them? What will you do if you do?"

"I don't know," said Naruto. "Boruto was working on a farm owned by a Fjordlandic woman. I think we could emulate those countries."

"You'll have to listen to them," said Hiashi.

"I know," said Naruto. "And I know what else you're going to say; that societies can't change from the top down. That's not what I'm trying to do, I'm trying to change the government."

"But there is something else I can do," he said. He turned to the butler standing in the doorway. He had been waiting for their attention, but they were so engrossed in their discussions. Naruto stood up and pointed at the mark on the man's forehead. "Since I won't be a Hyuuga-in-law for much longer, I'm just going to say it; why is this still practiced?"

"Because it's useful-"

"I don't want that excuse," Naruto interrupted. "Is that all you have to say? Would you like to tell that to Neji, if he was still alive?"

Hiashi opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. Then, he shamefully hung his head. "To be honest, I too lied to myself," he said. "I told myself that it was useful, because I was such a coward."

"Wait, what?" Naruto asked, expecting a lot more resistance.

"The truth is, after Neji died, I was in such grief that I almost ended the Branch House practice, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. I was afraid the secrets of the Byakugan would get out if I did end it, but

Himawari developed it, which means that the whole practice was unnecessary to begin with, now that I think about it." He gently pounded the table. "Neji deserved better. Instead, he became a red string for you and Hinata, which would have been against his wishes." He looked up at Naruto. "I will release the seal."

The butler stared at Hiashi and broke into tears. Then he dropped to his knees and bowed, thanking him profusely. Hiashi nodded apologetically.

"Best of luck to you, Naruto," said Hiashi.

Naruto paused. "... That's it?"

"That's it. Let me guess, you expected me to violently resist your plans?"

"Well, uh... not really."

Hiashi scoffed. "Like I said; I wouldn't dare pick a fight with you, not after everything you've done. Besides, it's time you finished upholding your promise. As for Neji... the clan will honor him, but we'll have to discuss that as a clan."

"Thank you," said Naruto.

"By the way, you're not dismissed," Hiashi said sternly. "My servants cooked up a good lunch for us, are you going to waste their labor?"

"No, sir!" Naruto sputtered.

Naruto got back to the Hokage office an hour later, stuffed and wondering why that had been so easy. He collapsed in his chair, sticking his feet out. Shikamaru entered right afterwards, carrying *more* paperwork. Just what Naruto needed.

"Where have you been?" Shikamaru asked.

"Hyuuga residence," Naruto answered.

"What were you doing there?"

In short, out of breath sentences, Naruto told him what happened.

"So... he's not angry?" Shikamaru asked.

"No," Naruto answered.

"But I think he has a good point about the system."

"What good point?"

"What are you going to do? How are you going to change things from the top down?"

"I'll change what I can in the government," said Naruto. "Maybe we could change things, like the age people need to be to become ninjas."

"Are you sure this a good idea?"

"Positive."

"But it'll make us weaker!"

"You want more generations to get as screwed up as we are!?"

"I want you to think this through!"

"I am thinking this through!"

"No you're not!"

"I already said, we'll get advice!"

"And *then* what!? Let the Otsutsuki Clan destroy us?"

"Changing the system has nothing to do with that!" Naruto countered. "An all-volunteer army could do a much better job!"

"You don't know that for sure."

"It's worth it," said Naruto, "For everlasting peace."

"Yeah, sure," Shikamaru said skeptically.

"Look, I know you have your opinions, but you need a little more faith in me."

"I'm not here to be your lackey," said Shikamaru.

"I don't want you to be," said Naruto. "I'm doing this. I'll put together a committee to make recommendations."

"A committee," Shikamaru scoffed.

"Just relax, and we'll take care of this," said Naruto. "Anything else?"

"Yes. We received a hawk message from Sasuke Uchiha. He'll be in Konoha in a few days."

Hi guys, thanks for reading, as always, and I hope you enjoyed this chapter! This meeting between Naruto and Hiashi was always going to be a pivotal part of the story, but it kinda went easier than I expected, haha! I've got more stuff coming, so please, stay tuned. Might not be easy, since I have a week-long trip to Texas from Chicago coming up in about a month, but hopefully I can get the next chapter up.

Again, thanks for reading!

Chapter 16

After carefully considering the ethics of hinting at, or playing a secret recording of, her boss explicitly saying that he was discriminating against her because of her name, Sakura *still* didn't know if she should play it during her interview.

Okay, let's back it up a little.

Scheduled to make an appearance on one of Konoha's top morning shows, Sakura was getting ready for a mostly soft interview about the Boruto Incident, but she planned to make it clear that she was getting the short end of the stick from the hospital. Perhaps during a possible question that the interviewer could ask, about what things were like at the hospital when Boruto arrived. Playing the recording could help, but it would probably be blackmail, since it's best reserved for a civil suit (that's what the lawyer said. And since she's a doctor, not a lawyer, it was best to let him take care of that, like a lawyer is not a doctor).

It was early morning. She had to get up early because the interview was scheduled early on an early-morning show. She didn't quite care about this show because it could be quite vapid, and she had little patience for vapid TV shows. Sarada wasn't even up yet. Of course, she hadn't gotten up early in days, thanks to the presently temporary suspension of chunin and genin missions, which allowed kids to sleep in. That could change in the coming days. Yesterday at the flower shop, she'd overheard a mother grumbling about how her son had nothing to do while the missions were suspended. Things must not have been cleared up at the Academy to allow the chunins and genins to return to normal schooling just yet. Again, that was likely to change at some point in the future.

Anyway, it was early morning, the sun was just peeking over the horizon, blah, blah, blah... Sakura yawned, glanced at the clock and remembered that she needed to be on her way to the station ASAP,

but she had just enough time to think over the pros and cons of revealing the chief of medicine's reasons for discriminating against her... but she already had the Hokage and a lawsuit on her side.

And just like that, the cons outweighed the pros. She could still talk about it, though.

Someone knocked at the door. She looked at the clock, noticed it was time to go, and concluded that it was the rickshaw driver she'd hired. Before leaving, she wrote a note for Sarada, then got up, put her shoes on and opened the door. The rickshaw driver bowed. He looked like a young kid, what with his gangly frame and more than a few pimples dotting his face, but he couldn't have been younger than 18 years old. "Are you Mrs. Uchiha?" he asked. She ignored his subtle disgust at saying her family name.

"Yes," she answered. The rickshaw driver stepped aside and she stepped outside to the rickshaw. When she was seated, the driver hopped in and drove away from the Uchiha residence.

The show's producer had already given Sakura a pre-interview, so she had a good idea of what to expect, which is why she was expecting a soft interview; it would be a heart-warming, feel-good story to help the housewives, who made up most of the show's viewership, start their day. Sakura didn't have anything against housewives, of course, but that's the show's nature, which probably said more about the show's producers instead of the audience. Or the audience could be just as vapid as the show itself. Who cares, it's just a TV show.

The trip itself went by pretty quickly, since the streets, or at least the streets the rickshaw driver took, weren't filled with pedestrians and other vehicles yet. Sakura wasn't relieved, but pleased. She had a little extra time to prepare for the interview, which was supposed to be during the show's second half hour. The show started right when the Hour of the Dragon began and ended during the Hour of the Snake. It was the Hour of the Dragon right now. In fact, the show had

just started, but she would be waiting in the green room and in make-up.

The rickshaw pulled up in front of the Konoha TV studio, stopping. Sakura hopped out and paid the driver before he pulled away. She walked up to the doorman and the doorman let her in. Then she walked up to the receptionist's counter and gave her name. The receptionist took a few moments to inform the producer that she had arrived, and when she was informed, sent a page down to collect Sakura. As it would be a few moments, she stepped aside to wait, but she didn't have to wait long. The page arrived after those couple moments, sooner than Sakura expected.

"Dr. Uchiha? If you could follow me, please," the page said softly. Sakura followed the page into the studio, to the green room where the page left her. Some tea and snacks had been left for her, and some magazines were spread out on the table. Old magazines that the staff had yet to recycle. She scoffed, remembering that patients had complained about the magazines in her General Practice office, and now she was. She had some tea and a riceball while sitting on a nice couch, waiting for the producer. She had done a lot of waiting today.

Just like the page, the producer didn't take long to come and collect her. She had been reading a magazine that was left on the table when she heard the door open and the producer, a middle-aged woman, stepped inside. Sakura was the first to bow, visibly slightly surprising the producer. But the producer recovered, returning the bow and leading Sakura to make-up, where she was quickly given a simple base and enough make-up so she could be presentable on TV in her current state, and that was it. When that was done, she was taken into the studio to wait for her appearance.

The page led her into the studio. It was a simple studio facing the street, with a few props surrounded by cameras, sound equipment and lights. On Sakura's far left was the weather station. The weatherman was in the middle of his segment, informing the viewers that the weather would be good today, as far as she could hear on

her side of the studio. The page had left her at the snack table. In the middle, the three hosts-three women and one man-sat on a long, crescent-shaped couch, listening to the weatherman's report. To their left, her right, was the interview set; two chairs and a table in the middle in front of a screen of Hokage Rock and the Hokage's residence.

The weatherman ended his report and the show went to a commercial break. The brown-haired host stood up from the couch, walked up to Sakura and bowed. "Good morning, Mrs. Uchiha," she said warmly.

"Good morning to you," Sakura answered, returning her bow.

Then the floor director walked up to the two of them. "Mrs. Uchiha, we will need you to-"

"Wait!" a voice called. Sakura turned and found her lawyer walking into the studio, out of breath. "Sorry I'm late!" he huffed.

"Who are you?" the announcer asked.

"My lawyer," said Sakura.

"My client has an ongoing lawsuit and can't answer much about the lawsuit," he said.

"Oh, that's quite alright, most of our questions have nothing to do with a potential lawsuit," said the hostess. "Is there a reason you had to delay us before we go back on air?"

"I was late," the lawyer answered.

"... I apologize."

"Miss, I think you should take your place," the floor director whispered. "We need to get her ready."

"Of course." The hostess and the floor director walked away. But Sakura lingered, just so she could ask the question that was on her mind earlier.

"I wanted to play a recording of the Chief of Medicine explaining why he cut my hours," she said. "Is that-"

"I wouldn't recommend it," he answered, "Especially since you'll be using it as evidence in the lawsuit."

"Alright," she said.

"ONE MINUTE!" the floor director called.

"You'd better get going. Look, sorry I brought it up in front of the interviewer, but if they ask you anything about it, just tell them you can't say much because of an ongoing legal issue, blah, blah, blah, but if you must, be subtle about it."

"Okay!" Sakura answered, thankful that she'd found and hired a lawyer in such a short time period just as dedicated to helping her as a long-time family lawyer could.

She sat down in one of the chairs. The hostess sat to her right. The floor director hurriedly attached her microphone to her top and bolted out of the way. Several seconds passed before the floor director shouted, "TEN! NINE! EIGHT! SEVEN! SIX! FIVE!" He stopped verbally counting, but she could see him counting down with his fingers until he pointed at the hostess, the same moment the right light in one of the cameras turned on.

"Hello, and welcome back to *Good Morning Konoha*," said the announcer, reading off the teleprompter while giving off a warm, welcoming smile and aura that fit the show's. "I'm joined today by Uchiha Sakura. Mrs. Uchiha is not a stranger to this show. She has been on here to discuss her time as a ninja, fighting alongside her current husband Uchiha Sasuke, and the 7th Hokage, Uzumaki Naruto. She's also appeared to discuss medical topics, too. But

today, she's here to discuss the recent incident involving the Hokage's son, Boruto. So much for state secrets, huh?" She chuckled, implying that was meant to be a laugh line. "It is because of that incident that many of our little ninjas-in-training have been made to stay home. But enough of that." She turned to Sakura. "Good morning, Mrs. Uchiha."

"Good morning," Sakura answered.

"How are you feeling today?"

"I'm feeling good," Sakura answered. It was the only answer she could give on TV.

"That's good. You were working at the hospital when the Hokage's son was brought in after being attacked. How did you react?"

"Well, first, thank you for having me here," Sakura answered. "I was in the middle of writing a report when I got a call from the hospital receptionist, asking me to the emergency room. I told them I was busy, but a few minutes later, I heard my name over the PA system, followed by the Chief of Medicine..." she glanced over to her lawyer, hoping that she could say what needed to be said. He nodded his head and she continued. "That I wasn't needed. Then my daughter called me and demanded for me to come, and that the Hokage was there."

"So what did you do next?"

"Well, I felt like something was urgent, because my daughter sounded urgent," Sakura continued. "When I got to the emergency room, I saw the Hokage, his son in a cart."

"Oh, wow," said the hostess. "What did you do next?"

Sakura shot a quick glance at her lawyer, who gestured and mouthed for her to keep things subtle. "Well, everything was busy," she answered, "But I had the patient moved into Intensive Care as

soon as possible. It was obvious he had a spinal injury, and there's only a short window of time for doctors to operate, or else the patient could be paralyzed, either from the waist or neck down. This was in the back of my mind.

"But my boss was hesitant to let me operate on the patient, but the Hokage convinced him to let me operate on his son because he trusted me so much."

"The Hokage trusted you?"

"Of course," she answered.

"Actually, now that I remember, you were on this program a few years ago to discuss your time with the famous Team 7 and you fought alongside the Hokage."

"Correct," said Sakura.

"Why was your boss hesitant to let you operate on the Hokage's son?" the hostess asked. As much as she wanted to play the tape, Sakura had to admit that this was as good a revelation the viewers at home could get, discussing the Chief of Medicine's bias and unprofessionalism.

"I can't say much, because I have some legal issues involved," she answered, glancing over at her lawyer to see him giving her the thumbs-up. "But he had been reducing my hours prior to that. The Hokage himself begged the Chief of Medicine to let me operate on his son, but he still refused."

"He refused? I thought you-"

"We eventually got him to let up and let me operate on the Hokage's son," Sakura interrupted.

"Oh, I see. So then what happened?"

"Well, the surgery I performed was fairly routine," she answered. "First, we checked to see if he could move his fingers, which he could. Then I used my chakra to examine him and found that his ninth and tenth vertebrae were fractured."

"You're going about this so professionally!" the hostess chuckled.

Sakura chuckled, too. "Well, I have to write a lot of reports. It's a habit! Anyway, after some Chakra Resonance Images, we got a better idea of the damage that had been done to his spine. When I told the Hokage about this, he re-iterated his belief in me." She subtly blushed at recalling his compliment. "The surgery itself was routine. Like I said, I've operated on many spines before. I just made an incision with my chakra, some doctors helped me, and before we knew it, his spine was better."

"That's *such* a relief," said the hostess. "Will he be alright?"

"He'll be okay," Sakura answered. "He will have to undergo physical therapy, and his ninja career might even be over before it began, but he will fully recover. Especially if he commits himself to healing."

"That's wonderful to hear," said the hostess. "Also, I see we have some time left, do you mind answering some more questions?"

"Absolutely not," Sakura said with a smile. In hindsight, she made the right call. In the immediate hindsight, she was about to regret it.

"Why *did* the Chief of Medicine reduce your hours?" A fair question. Sakura decided to play it safe and repeat her previous statement.

"I can't say much, because I have some legal issues involved," she answered. "The case is currently ongoing. But what I can say is that it's related to my family."

"Ah, yes, the Uchiha," said the hostess. "You are married to Sasuke Uchiha. Why?"

Sakura froze in her seat, caught off guard by such a personal question. She couldn't see him out of the corner of her eye, but her lawyer had grabbed his head.

"I... don't understand what this has to do with the topic we're discussing," Sakura answered. She was sure she would come across as someone who valued her privacy. "Besides, Sasuke Uchiha is a hero to the village; he helped defeat Kaguya Otsutsuki, saving the world from the Infinite Tsukuyomi in the process."

The hostess gave a gesture of concession. "Well, I was only asking because I was wondering what you saw in him, why you married him. Have been told that he tried to kill you on several occasions, called you useless and annoying... how did you get him to change his mind?"

Sakura appreciated that the hostess had worded her question in a more positive manner. "Well, it took some time and effort, but he was finally able to warm up to me," she said.

"And what do you love about him?"

"I love his... cool, calm demeanor... his... determination, his..." Inner Sakura started panicking as she tried to come up with a reason she loved him, drawing blanks. "It doesn't matter. I love him and I was there for him when he needed it."

"Even though he hated you?"

"We were kids," Sakura replied, "And he was traumatized by his family's massacre."

"Ah, yes, the Uchiha family massacre," said the hostess. "Is this the reason why the Chief of Medicine reduced your hours and refused to let you operate on the Hokage's son?"

"I can neither confirm nor deny, because it relates to ongoing legal matters."

"Right, of course. My apologies. The thing is... the Uchiha did plan a coup against the Village."

"The Village persecuted the clan," Sakura replied. "And even if they were planning a coup, the actions the Village took were unacceptable, to say the least. The leaders of the coup should have been arrested and given a fair trial."

"Well, some would say the Village Elders were in a tight spot," said the hostess. "After all, the Uchiha *were* the Village police force."

"I'm not saying the Uchiha weren't innocent victims," said Sakura. "It was Danzo who ordered Itachi Uchiha to carry out the massacre. As for my husband, he was traumatized by the incident, hence why he was so cold."

"But that doesn't excuse his actions," the hostess countered. "Sasuke Uchiha betrayed the village, joined the Akatsuki-a terrorist organization!-tried to kill the Five Kages, tried to kidnap an innocent man, tried to kill you and the future Hokage, and even planned to overthrow all governments with himself as absolute dictator. Yes, Sasuke Uchiha was the victim of great trauma and struggle, but to say the man is a misunderstood, innocent victim is laughable! Why do you love him after everything he's done to others and to you? What do your parents think about this?"

"I didn't come on her to answer such questions about my personal life!" Sakura snapped. She did notice, out of the corner of her eye, that her lawyer was gone. In the heat of the moment, she assumed that he had abandoned her. He'd actually ran to the control room to get the producer to stop this current line of questioning. He wasn't there yet.

"And, from what you have told us, you pressured him into a marriage he didn't want to be in!"

"I asked you to stop asking about my personal life!" Sakura shouted.

There were only three seconds of dead air and silence after she shouted like that, but, as cliché as it sounds, they felt like an eternity. Realizing what had just happened, Sakura looked out at the crew. They were staring at her with their mouths open. She also realized that she was getting out of her seat and gripping the arm rests so hard that the wood had cracked. She let go and took a deep breath.

"I sincerely apologize for my outburst," she said.

"Apology accepted," said the hostess. "And I apologize for asking such personal questions. It's my job as a journalist."

"I understand."

While she did help diffuse the situation on her own, her lawyer had finally reached the control room, demanding that the producer stop the hostess from asking those questions anymore. The producer then relayed that to the hostess.

"Ladies, and gentlemen, I apologize for that," said the hostess. "We do have just enough time for one more question. Mrs. Uchiha; in one sentence, from your personal experience, how would you describe the Hokage?"

Sakura instantly, reflexively smiled, a slight blush painting the corners of her eyes. "One of the kindest, selfless human beings I've ever known," she answered.

The red lights on the cameras turned off, signaling commercial break. Sakura and the hostess stood up.

"Again, I am so sorry for those questions."

"This is embarrassing," Sakura huffed and politely stormed off the set. Her lawyer was there pretty soon, however, holding her down. It made him joke about adding a therapy charge to her legal bill, making her nervous again. On top of a sinking mortgage, she needed to pay off her legal bills, too.

But a seed of doubt had already been planted in her mind, one that would grow into a plant that was the best decision she'd ever make until the next best decision she'd ever make.

Paperwork was spread-out all over Naruto's desk, and he wasn't even 1/3 of the way through it. It's probably been said before, but Naruto HATED paperwork, so much so that he would jump right back into ninja-ing just to get away from it. It always left him exhausted at the end of the day, which was why it was so frustrating that Boruto rarely, if ever, accepted that explanation. He called it an excuse. Naruto wanted to tell him there's a difference, but he remembered that he was at work right now. Hell, another reason he hated paperwork was it was so mind-numbing whenever he often lost himself in his work.

But it had to be done. By sheer rotten luck, much of it had piled up during Boruto's hospital stay and initial rehab and had continued piling up even when Boruto left the hospital. He already had a hard time catching up with paperwork jams caused by Boruto's antics, part of the reason Naruto hated it when Boruto tried to pull some childish prank (Any lingering mischievous side in Naruto was rarely, if ever, impressed with Boruto's pranks. He'd pulled better).

He'd just finished the first third of his paperwork when his secretary rang him up on the intercom. "*Lord Hokage, sir, there's... there's someone here to see you.*" Was she scared?

"Tell them I'm busy," said Naruto.

"*It's, um... hoo boy. It's Sasuke Uchiha, sir.*"

Naruto froze and he felt a knot in his chest. Sasuke wasn't expected back for some time now. Had he found more information about the Otsutsuki Clan? His heart racing, he put his pen to paper to finish this small batch of paperwork. "Send him in!" he sputtered. It was like the universe was conspiring to keep him from finishing his paperwork.

That didn't stop him from finishing up some more papers while Sasuke was on his way to his office, until he heard the door knocking. He just had a few more things to take care of, but he was ready to meet Sasuke.

"Uh, come in!"

The door opened and Sasuke Uchiha entered his office. They held gazes for several moments before Naruto finally blinked and smiled. Sasuke walked up to him, carrying himself the way he always did; better than everyone, but still humble. He held out his only hand to Naruto to shake and Naruto accepted it. "Good to see you again," he said.

"The same," Sasuke answered. "You're probably wondering why I'm here."

"I wasn't expecting you," said Naruto.

"You never do."

"Well? What do you have for me?"

"I haven't found anything concrete, but I'm following leads on the Otsutsuki Clan's old palace," said Sasuke.

Naruto felt deflated. He expected something else. "Is that it?"

"No. There's more. I heard about an Otsutsuki-worshipping cult in the Land of Waves and I'll follow up on that."

Naruto released a breath he didn't know he was holding. "That's better," he said.

"And I've heard other rumors; that the Hokage's son was attacked by rogue ninjas."

"Where did you hear that?" Naruto asked, his chest tightening again.

"It's all over the news," Sasuke answered. Of course it was.

State secrets, my ass, Naruto thought.

"I didn't think you were so pathetic," Sasuke huffed.

Naruto didn't take kindly to this. "You know I could still have you arrested for attempted murder," he snapped.

"You won't, because you still need me," Sasuke snorted.

"Aw, you know me so well, dear!" Naruto said, doing his best flattered wife impression. "You know, people actually used to gossip that we were in love. They still do."

"They're fools," Sasuke answered. "So what gives? You failed as a father and now you're trying to make up for it. I could've done it myself."

"You would've just continued the Cycle of Hate," Naruto replied.

"It's my Curse," Sasuke answered.

"Not a great excuse."

"I didn't say it was an excuse."

"I know. It's an explanation. There's a difference. Even so, you had the guts to come into my office and insult me. I'm just returning the favor."

"Just like you," Sasuke said.

"Boruto's doing alright. Your *wife* saved him from paralysis. It wouldn't have been the worst thing that could happen to him, but I'm relieved."

"Good for her," Sasuke answered. Naruto huffed again.

"You're such a softie," he said sarcastically.

"I'd ask you not to say that again, but you will again some time."

"Obviously." Naruto sighed. "Well, since you're here, I'll confess something else. I'm getting divorced. It's almost finalized."

"Your son will hate you even more."

"I'll break it to him when he and I are ready," said Naruto. "Are you going to visit Sakura and Sarada? Sakura was just on TV. Sounds like something's going on between you two."

"I can't contact her," Sasuke said.

"You have the Rinnegan, a cell phone and a messenger hawk," Naruto snorted. "Do you even want to see her?"

"Maybe I will," Sasuke answered.

"You can stay overnight," Naruto said. "Just be sure to leave before the village police or the feds try to arrest you."

"They can't."

"I said *try*," said Naruto.

"Let them try," said Sasuke. He turned to leave.

"There will also be Fjordlandic diplomats coming within the month," said Naruto. "I have some plans for reform."

"Good to hear."

"By the way, Sasuke," Naruto started, "I know we're supposed to have a strong bond and all, but there's something I've always wanted to say to you." Sasuke stopped and turned around, as if expecting something profound. Instead, Naruto declared,

"You're a *dick* ."

"Heh. Well in that case... you only 'promised' to 'save' me because you didn't want to be seen as a failure. And to get in Sakura's-"

"Are you going to leave or not?"

Sasuke grinned, turned around and left.

So how was that?

I finished this in the Metropolitan Lounge in Chicago's Union Station, waiting to board a train to Dallas, Texas, and uploaded it while on said train. WOOHOO! I'm glad I managed to get it done! I had some troubles finishing this chapter, but I think I did okay.

By the way, the part where Sakura goes to the TV station was one of the easiest parts of this story, because I didn't have to do a whole lot of research into it! Fun fact, I took a TV production course in college, and we staged our own little Judge Judy parody! I just drew from memory to write down the process. Hope you liked it!

Chapter 17

Right after her interview, Sakura went straight to Ino's flower shop to start her shortened shift. Her interview and near outburst were behind her, and she had to get straight to work. Although, Ino went easy on her when she arrived for her shift, giving her half an hour to rest after her commute from the TV studio. The flower shop wasn't busy, so Sakura didn't see the harm in taking an unofficial break before the mid-day rush, a sentiment with which Ino agreed. The past part was, Ino said she could clock in as soon as she arrived, allowing her to be paid for her first half-hour break, a gesture Sakura was visibly thankful to Ino for. Saying she was just a good employer, Ino waved her off, chuckling.

After her paid break, Sakura emerged from the breakroom to start tweaking some floral arrangements, as per Ino's instructions when she arrived. The store still wasn't busy. Without looking up from her paperwork, Ino handed her a pail and pointed at some arrangements that needed watering right now or were going to need watering soon, like, today. Sakura went directly to work on those arrangements in question, giving them just a couple of drops of water here and there, and a little chakra if they looked a bit too down. Keeping up her healing abilities was necessary, and as long as she was a glorified part-timer at the hospital, she would do this while waiting for a resolution to her employment situation.

A customer walked in. Ino looked up from her paperwork, smiled, bowed, and went right back to work. Sakura turned away from her work to bow, too. The customer, an older woman, bowed to them both, then began browsing the merchandise. Sakura also turned her attention back to her work, checking the arrangements for any hint that she needed to water them.

She quickly noticed that the older woman kept looking back at her, visibly curious. Sakura had seen that look before many times, so she wasn't unnerved. She just kept working, adjusting & watering

flowers... it was getting kind of monotonous. Now and then, she checked to see if the older woman was still staring at her. To her relief-why relief? Oh right, it's not polite to stare-she most often caught the woman examining flower arrangements instead of her.

"Sakura! I'm going back to the office," said Ino. "Take care of the register for me, please."

"Okay," Sakura answered.

Ino picked up her paperwork and moved to the back, then Sakura put the water pail down and took Ino's place at the register. The older woman continued examining the arrangements, even as the first rush, or what could be considered a rush, came in the store: three middle-aged women, all bantering back and forth. They must be old friends, Sakura observed. She smiled and bowed to them; they returned the gesture.

Finally, the old lady found what she was looking for and brought it to the counter to check out. "Will that be all?" Sakura asked, smiling.

"That will be all," said the old lady.

Sakura rang the old lady up and began wrapping the flowers up when the old woman asked, "Have I seen you before?"

Sakura shrugged. "I don't know."

"Sorry. I feel like I've seen you somewhere before."

Sakura shrugged again. "I was a war hero. And a top doctor."

"No, I don't think-Oh, that's right, I saw you on TV this morning!" Sakura stopped, smiled awkwardly, and continued. "Why did you get so mad?" the old lady asked. Sakura ignored her. "And why did you marry that Uchiha jerk? Walking out on you for 12 years? I'd have divorced my husband if he did that. He's dead now, so-"

"Your arrangement is ready, ma'am," Sakura interrupted, handing the old woman the flowers. "Thank you for coming!" She bowed and the old lady walked out of the store. The three women were looking at Sakura. She sighed. The best, and arguably the most professional thing, she could do, was to ignore them and focus the current tasks. But they weren't ready to check out. But once again, she had time to water some plants that needed it.

Out of nowhere, she remembered Ino's question, " *Who are you waiting for? Sasuke?* " She frowned, keeping out of Ino's sight. Why did that thought occur to her? It was distracting. Heck, why did Ino ask her about Sasuke?

She refused to think about it. Damn that old woman. Even worse, the women were still staring at her. They too must have seen her interview earlier in the day. Not wanting to put up with awkward, disapproving stares for the entire day, she employed any retail worker's ultimate weapon:

"Do you need help with anything?"

The women retreated into their own circle, but Sakura could see the embarrassment in their eyes. Sakura grinned to herself, confident that she'd bought just a little time to focus on her work without getting distracted.

And yet, those same thoughts about Sasuke kept gnawing at her. She could hold a stone face while she dealt with inner turmoil, but it was still distracting, which could lead to her messing up one of the arrangements, drawing more unwanted attention. She tried whistling to herself. That worked for a little while before the doubts about Sasuke came roaring back. They weren't new doubts, though; the seeds had been planted when she was a teenage kunoichi, but dried up, and were finally watered, ready to sprout and bloom under the right circumstances.

Was she making a mistake by pursuing Sasuke? What was she thinking, continuing to love him after he tried to kill her multiple

times? Why did she continue to insist that he loved her, despite being away for over a decade? (The last one was explainable because of his mission, but he *could* try to call her now and then) And what, exactly, did she see in him?

Once upon a time, Sasuke Uchiha was a sweet, innocent boy. Then his brother Itachi slaughtered their entire clan right in front of him, traumatizing him, turning him into a dark, brooding bad boy, and eventually worse. At the time, the girls went crazy for him, but he wasn't interested in him. Sakura was one of those girls. But so was Ino. Both girls had been rivals their entire lives, so now that there was a boy involved, who just happened to be the Popular Bad Boy, Sakura wanted to beat Ino in something else. So she had to suffer in silence while Sasuke descended further into darkness, becoming an S-class criminal and finally paying for his crimes, although not according to the village, for her to finally have a chance with him.

Well, she won, but now Ino was the one who had things in order, while Sakura was about to lose her—as in, the Uchiha-house just weeks ago. She still hadn't caught up in her house payments, but the threatening letters had stopped.

She had won, but at what cost? Any outsider would ask that if they were sympathetic to her.

Eventually, the women who'd been staring at her earlier finally, after making the situation awkward for everyone, came up to the counter to check out their items. To her relief, the women didn't say a thing to her but did give her judgmental looks she did her best to ignore.

Right as the women left, the first of the day's rushes officially began, mercifully occupying her physically and mentally for the rest of the day, save for her breaks.

Sai came by to help with the flower shop close to the end of Sakura's shift. Paying Sakura no mind, Ino greeted him passionately; she ran out from behind the counter, hugged him, then passionately kissed him and shared a Moment with him. She wasn't doing it to mock

Sakura, and Sakura knew that, but her chest tightened at the sight of it. They were... happy. Sai was genuinely delighted to see her. Sakura didn't remember a moment where Sasuke gave her such a loving look in the few meetings they had.

It was a bit better than when she was a teenager when he tried to kill her on multiple occasions...

But wouldn't she be a horrible person if she just up and threw Sasuke out of her house? Someone had told her that giving up on Sasuke would make her an awful person, and when a girl falls in love, her heart can't be changed...

Who came up with that?

A customer walked up to her with a bouquet, snapping her out of her reverie. The woman looked at her suspiciously, unhappy that she'd been daydreaming.

"Did you find everything alright?" Sakura asked.

"Of course," the woman replied.

"Do you mind if I ask you something?"

The woman stared at her, and Sakura blushed.

"Never mind," she said.

She rang the woman up and let her go. Ino, who had been watching, walked up to some more customers to greet them.

Her break finally came, and she made a beeline for the break room and sat down at the break table, sighing. *When did my life turn into a damned melodrama?* She thought.

Sai entered the break room and sat down. "Are you alright?" he asked.

"I don't know," Sakura answered. "Can I ask you a question?"

Sai looked up at her as if anticipating what she was going to ask.

"Am I a bad person for no longer loving someone?"

"I don't know," Sai answered. He was glad he didn't have to refer to his books this time because he hadn't needed them for years.

Sakura growled.

"I think it just happens," Sai started, "When you-"

"When I what?"

"I wasn't talking about you."

"I don't know if I ever loved Sasuke," she admitted.

"Huh?"

Sakura froze, realizing what she'd just subconsciously said. "I didn't mean that!"

"But did you love him?" Sai asked, "Or did you just see him as a prize to be won?"

"Don't talk to me like that."

He'd read somewhere that people will get defensive when confronted with their flaws.

"Are you happy now?"

"No," she said. "I'm losing my house, and my other boss hates me, my husband won't come home, my mom hates me, too-I'm a mess."

"I... don't know what to say," he said.

Sakura growled. "I just had an interview, on TV, and the interviewer asked me what I saw in Sasuke," she said.

Sai thought back to the interview and remembered that the hostess *had* asked her what she saw in Sasuke. "Is that why you're out of it?"

"Maybe," Sakura answered.

"You should go home."

"No!" Sakura said. She took three deep breaths. "I mean... I can do this. It's just a couple more hours. I've worked with stress before. I can do this."

Sai nodded, sure that she wasn't going to be able to do this, but he didn't run the flower shop. That was Ino's call.

"For what they call 'the record'," he said, "I don't think you should have married Sasuke, I think you should have given up on him because he wasn't interested in you." Sai conveniently ignored the part where Ino told him not to tell Sakura about this, but since he was voicing his opinion, he had a loophole. Plus, Sakura's disdainful expression was guaranteed to get him off the hook. For now.

Sakura's annoyance dissipated and she groaned. Her life really *had* become an awful melodrama!

Sakura finally got back home that afternoon, exhausted. She went straight to the kitchen, sat at the table, and prepared for yet another lonely night. It's okay. She's used to this. She still had Sarada, and she could call her mom, who'd... probably... hang up. She sighed, and her head lolled backward until it was almost parallel to the floor. Reflexively, she recovered, shifting her weight forward to the chair could land back on its front feet.

She wanted to be happy so desperately, but she just... wasn't. Why?

Well, financial issues certainly hurt anyone's chances to be happy. But she'd never had financial problems until recently. To be clear, it wasn't her or Sasuke's fault that she had these issues. She hadn't figured out that it was both of their faults yet. For the moment, though, there wasn't an answer. Sai had already voiced his opinion, and even though he was her old teammate, she dismissed said opinion. Not just because it was inappropriate, but it didn't answer her question about why things had gone wrong for her.

She heard the door open and slam. Sarada had returned. Her footsteps pounded up the stairs to her room. Sakura groaned but thought she could still coax her down so they could watch the latest episode of the *Gutsy Ninja* drama.

Tired, she lowered her head onto the table when someone knocked on the door.

Startled, she sprang up in her seat and looked around. After chastising herself for doing that, she hurried to get up from the table, ran out of the kitchen, and drove to the foyer.

"I'm coming, I'm coming!" she called. She opened the door and froze.

"Sas... uke?"

Her husband stared down at her. "Hello, Sakura," he said emotionlessly.

Sakura didn't think about that. She stammered and shuffled out of his way so he could come inside. "Please, why don't you come inside?" she asked aloud.

He did, not bothering to remove his cloak, but did remove his shoes.

"Why didn't you tell me you were in town?" she asked. *You never tell me anything.*

"I had to keep it a secret," he said, "Or else the police would come after me."

"You already served your time," she responded.

"They still don't like me."

"Oh," she said quietly. Her heart pounded, and her knees shook. Why was this happening? She already had enough questions and problems for today.

In an attempt to stop shaking, she gestured to her- *their* -kitchen. Sasuke walked past her, his very presence causing her to shake again. She followed him.

They entered the kitchen. Sakura gestured for him to sit down and started to make some tea. Sasuke removed his cape, hung it on the seatback, and sat down. While she was at her counter, Sakura leaned forward against it. A lot of questions swam through her head, and that little seed of doubt planted earlier was sprouting against her will. This wasn't the time to have these doubts! "How has the mission been going?" she asked.

"I cannot say much," he said, "But I have found important information that I have already shared with the Hokage."

"And?"

"And what?"

"What did you tell him?"

"That is on a need-to-know basis," he answered.

"Well, / need to know," she said. To her dismay, Sasuke didn't say anything else. Sakura sucked in a sharp breath through her nose. Strike one. "I was... on TV today," she continued, attempting to change the subject.

"I know. Naruto told me."

"What did he say?"

"He said it sounds like something is going on between us," he said.
"Is there?"

"No," she answered. "I'd rather not talk about that, by the way. It's... embarrassing." Sasuke sighed but agreed to drop the subject.

"He is still the same as he always was," he continued. "Still naïve, afraid of failure, and what others think of him. He also called me a dick, which I admit was funny."

Sakura laughed, but at the part where Sasuke told her what Naruto called him.

"And he only liked you because of rivalry with me," Sasuke continued.

"I know that," she growled. Naruto and Sasuke didn't have to open a wound she didn't know she had. That was a scummy move on Naruto's part.

She finished the tea and gave some to Sasuke. She'd made enough for them both, and she sat down with some of her own. Neither said a word for several moments. Thinking of something to say, Sakura fidgeted with her fingers and feet. A few ideas came to her but died as soon as they reached her lips. She looked over at Sasuke, saw that he was quietly sipping his tea, and forced a smile at him. She wanted to be happy that he was back, but she knew that he was going to leave the first chance he got, and she wanted to enjoy as much of their time together as she could.

She wasn't enjoying this time right now.

"So... Why... why didn't you try to call us? Send a hawk or... you know, call us?"

"The mission takes priority," he answered.

"I know that," she replied. "But you could still send us a coded message or something."

"The mission. Takes. Priority." He said. Clenching her fist, Sakura concluded there was no explanation here, just an excuse. Strike two.

"We could lose the house," she told him outright. "I saw my hours drop at the hospital and the bank is telling me it might foreclose, and we're low on your clan's money."

"That will be taken care of," he said.

"But I had to take a second job at Ino's flower shop!" she objected.

"I said it will be taken care of," he replied.

"My hours were cut because of our family name," she continued. "I told the Hokage about it, but we're going to sue the hospital and the chief of medicine."

Sasuke softly slammed the mug on the table. "What's this?"

"So you'll help me-"

"What did he say about us?"

"I... don't remember everything."

Sasuke sighed irritated. "Just great. I come back, and my family name is being dragged through the mud again."

"FINALLY! Now, we need to-"

"You stay here. You'll just screw this up for me."

"Ex... cuse me?" Sakura growled. She was trembling again, but not out of fear. Oh no, this was an emotion that had been bubbling up

since she was a little kid and was reaching a boiling point.

He got up from the table. "I have to leave again, but before I do, I will handle-"

"NO!" she shouted. Strike three. "YOU are going to stay longer than a day, and YOU are going to help me get my job back!"

"I am going, and do not know when I will be back. You need to wait-"

"Wait!? I DID MY WAITING! TWELVE YEARS OF IT! OR ELEVEN, I LOST COUNT! ALL FOR YOU!"

"What are you-"

"YOU WALKED OUT ON ME, YOU WALKED OUT ON OUR DAUGHTER, YOU WALKED OUT ON THE CLAN, AND YOU THINK YOU CAN KEEP DOING THIS!? DO YOU EVEN CARE!?"

Sakura stopped, her mouth open, eyes wide. She remembered all the times he verbally and physically mistreated her, how he said she was annoying, how he tried to kill her. Sure, they were kids. But they still knew what they were doing, especially him.

"You never loved me," she said, voice wavering. A tear ran down her cheek.

"It took you until now to figure it out?" he asked. "I only agreed to marry you so you would shut up. All you cared about was your childish crush on me and beating Ino at something."

She had to admit the awful truth; he was right. Her fists shook with rage.

"Now if you'll excuse me, I have something I need to take care of in the village," he said.

"Sasuke... youuu... BASTAAAARRRRRD!" She threw her right fist at him, socking his jaw. Sasuke's eyes widened in shock in that split

second before her fist connected. He flew backward several feet, crashing into the wall behind him.

"What was... what was that!?"

"I don't know, but it felt good!"

"Oh, so I am the villain now?"

"I don't know who's worse in this situation," she growled, "But I've had enough. I should've given up on you the moment you cast that genjutsu on me. Or when you just left with a 'sorry' for everything you'd done."

"I know," he said.

"But you're a deadbeat," she said. "I've been raising Sarada all by myself while you go off galivanting around on your pity party, and you've only bothered to..." She collapsed on the floor, the emotions of the moment draining her of energy. The one thing she wasn't too tired to do, though, was cry, and cry viscerally.

Sasuke collected himself and stood up. He stood by while she cried. It finally died down, but she was still on the floor.

"Thank you for being honest with me," she said.

"You're welcome."

"I'm trash," she continued, "Useless. Scum. No wonder people hate me."

The kitchen was silent again. Then Sakura spoke again. "I don't know if I fell out of love with you or if I never truly loved you to begin with. Either way, I can't take this anymore." She looked up at him. Her eyes were red from all the crying. "Let's get divorced."

Sasuke said nothing. But he did nod.

"Now get out of my hou-shit, it's *your* house, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Sasuke answered.

She remained still on the floor for a few more seconds, then stood up, quickly walked out of the room, and stormed upstairs. First, she stopped at Sarada's room and knocked. "Sarada?" she called. Sarada didn't answer at first. Sakura knocked again. "Sarada, pack your bags. We're going to stay at grandma's house for a couple of days."

"I heard you and dad!" Sarada replied, her voice muffled by the door. "You're getting divorced, aren't you?"

"... Yes."

"... But I thought grandma said-"

"Please, just pack up," Sakura begged. "She'll have to forgive me."

As soon as she heard activity from the other side of the door, Sakura stepped away from Sarada's room and into hers. She pulled out a suitcase and started filling it with clothes, toiletries, and other grooming products until the suitcase was stuffed full. Using her chakra, she effortlessly lifted the suitcase and carried it downstairs. Sasuke and Sarada were waiting.

"Got your things?" Sakura asked. Sarada nodded.

"Can't believe this," Sarada grumbled. "Bortuo's going to tease me about this for months."

"Just tell him to shut up," said Sakura. Turning to Sasuke, she said, "I'm sorry. I should've given up on you earlier."

Sasuke snorted and said, "We agree."

Without another word, Sakura picked up her suitcase, took Sarada's hand, and walked out the door.

Mebuki had been surprised to see Sakura on TV that morning. But as soon as she saw her, she changed the channel. Kizashi didn't say anything but did glance at her for a second, observing her stone face of disapproval. It wasn't like this was the first time she'd seen her daughter in person or image in years-she saw her just last month-but the name "Sakura Uchiha" made her want to vomit. She'd told her daughter that her feelings for Sasuke were just a childish crush that she was too stubborn to let go, which caused Sakura to yell at her, telling her she hated her and walked out on her. She didn't even remember being at their wedding.

Kizashi wanted to say more, but Mebuki got up from her seat and walked out, telling him that she was going to the library for the day. It saddened Kizashi because even though he disapproved of her relationship with Sasuke, for the same reasons as Mebuki, he still wanted her in their lives. He sighed and changed the channel back, watching her proudly as she described how she saved Boruto's spine, pride in her expression, too. He told her last time that Mebuki was proud of her career choice, but so far, mother and daughter didn't speak much.

At the day's end, Mebuki returned from the library carrying a stack of three books, all about "independent women," written by authors from far-off lands. Kizashi wanted to ask why Mebuki got the books, to which Mebuki replied that she just needed something to read to get her mind off things. He knew precisely which things she meant.

So, imagine his surprise when, right as the Gutsy Ninja drama was about to start, he heard someone knocking at the door.

"I'm coming!" he called, standing up from his seat at the chabudai in front of the TV, and ran over to the door. When he opened it, his eyes widened, and his mouth dropped.

Sakura and Sarada stood in the doorway, holding suitcases. They both looked very rough, which surprised Kizashi, but the delight of

seeing Sakura overrode that surprise. "Sakura!" he declared. "It's so good to see you!"

"Hi, Dad," she answered, tired.

"Coming to see your grandpa?" Kizashi asked Sarada.

"Yeah, grandpa," she answered, but looking at Sakura, whose eyes were still downcast.

"How long will you stay for?" he asked.

"A few days... I hope."

Her reveal, and the way she said it, said a lot without revealing even more. It was Sasuke-related. "What happened?"

"You were right, dad," she mumbled.

"Huh?"

"I said you were right!"

Kizashi stammered until he saw that Sakura was just as dumbfounded as he was. But this time he didn't need to turn around. Well, he did, because he only wanted to see for sure. Mebuki stood behind him, arms crossed, just like her mood.

Sakura almost shrank from her mother's glare but didn't move. Then she dropped her suitcase and ran into her mother, throwing her arms around her and burying her face in her shoulder to cry. Stunned, Mebuki looked back and forth between Kizashi and Sakura as tears welled up in her own eyes. Then she returned her daughter's hug.

"Mom! I'm so sorry!" Sakura sobbed.

"It's okay," Mebuki cooed. "Let's talk it over with some tea, okay?" Sakura nodded and let go of her mother. Then mother and daughter returned to the kitchen to finally patch up some old wounds.

WOO! Finally! One of the most important chapters so far, and I finally got it done! Been one of the big plot targets for me so far and I'm glad I finally managed to finish it.

I hope I was able to do this right. I was worried that I hadn't focused enough on Sakura before this pivotal chapter, so I apologize if you weren't convinced. If not, you're welcome, Sasuke did need to get punched. I also had some second thoughts on this whole story; someone told me that for a while it was listed in the "Ron the Death Eater" page on TV Tropes until it was recently deleted. So I thought it over until I decided to keep writing this, while still making it somewhat neutral on whose responsibility it is for their predicament and adding a new theme. Hopefully it won't get bogged down. Did you guys think I was falling under "Ron the Death Eater?"

Anyways, sorry it took so long, but I hope you guys liked this chapter!

Chapter 18

"I can't believe I just did thaaaaaat!" Sakura cried, her head on the table next to a bottle and saucer of sake. Mebuki sighed sympathetically, simultaneously rubbing Sakura's back. "I didn't mean to be such a horrible person, I just wanted to get Sasuke to stay a little longer!"

"It's okay, it's okay," Mebuki cooed. It has to be said, Mebuki didn't mind re-bonding with Sakura after a decade-long falling out. Even when she was going through a very emotionally stressful time after such an equally emotional moment in her life, but that's what a mother is for. She was also thankful that Kizashi was performing his usual doting grandfather role with Sarada. They were playing shogi in Sakura's old room, now converted into a guest room, but it was mainly for Sarada. "Do you know... *why* you did it?"

"Nooooooo!" Sakura cried again. "It just came over me! I feel like I'm living one of your soap operas!"

"That's not fair!" Mebuki grumbled, a vein popping on her forehead. "Just... run this by me again. What made you yell at him?"

Sakura re-recapped her day, starting with the interview, her sudden, inexplicable doubt about her relationship that the hostess *probably* unintentionally caused with her questions, then finally her confrontation with Sasuke, and how 12 years of frustration finally caused her to punch Sasuke. Mebuki did have to admit that it was like a bunch of contrivances soap opera writers pull out of their asses for shock value, but she was just happy that Sakura finally punched him.

"What was I thinking!?" Sakura whined, a true picture of elegance. "I should go back and apologize and make up, I can't-"

"Sakura, calm down, dear," Mebuki interrupted.

"I'm a horrible person!"

"No, you're not, you're human."

"Yes, I am!"

"Good, you've admitted you're human," Mebuki teased.

"MOM!"

"You know what I think?" Mebuki asked. "Do not give way to heedlessness, or to intimacy with sensual delight-For a mindful person attains an abundance of ease."

"Did you just quote the Buddha?" Sakura asked incredulously.

"Pain in is inevitable in life, but suffering is optional," Mebuki continued.

"Okay, but the Buddha didn't say that," Sakura grumbled.

"No, but I read it in a book recently, and I liked it."

Sakura groaned.

"No, you're not a horrible person," Mebuki continued. "Where did you get this idea, anyway?"

"I always thought that a girl's heart can never-"

"You're a woman now, not a girl," Mebuki interrupted.

"MOM!"

"Sorry. Continue, please."

"Well, when I was a girl, I thought when a girl falls in love, her heart can't be changed," Sakura said.

"Well, that's nonsense," said Mebuki. "I've known plenty of girls and women who've changed after falling in love."

"Like who?"

"You!"

"Yuu?"

"No, you just did!" Mebuki laughed.

"Sakura, sometimes what you want isn't what you need," said Mebuki.

"Well, what do you think?" Sakura asked.

"You practically stopped talking to me because I told you Sasuke was bad for you!" Mebuki laughed, indignant. "You want my input *now* ? After you admitted I was right?"

"Just tell me!"

"Okay, fine! He was bad for you!"

"Ugh, I *knew* you'd say that!"

"You asked me for my opinion, and now you're mad!?" Mebuki laughed, frustrated.

"Okay, fine! Tell me *why* you think he was bad for me!"

"That's better!" Mebuki replied. "But you'll be happy, because, I'm not going to lecture you. I'm just going to ask you some questions. Did Sasuke ever, before he *mi-rac-you-lus-ly* returned your feelings, ever genuinely smile at you?"

"Maybe."

Mebuki sighed. No way Sakura was going to remember *everything* . This was folly.

"Okay, fine. How many times did he tell you he hated you?"

"... Five times?"

"Five times?" Mebuki laughed. "Knowing him, he meant it. I can't understand why he would suddenly fall for you, either."

"Are you insulting me?"

"No," Mebuki replied. Her expression changed, now saddened that her daughter would say that. Sakura sighed, leaned her head back to stare at the ceiling.

"No, you were right, mom," she admitted. Mebuki blinked, surprised. "I don't know why he suddenly said he loved me, either! We just had sex, then he left, I had Sarada, and then Sarada asked if Karin Uzumaki was her real mother... what went wrong!?"

"Didn't you always used to complain that I kept butting in, telling you exactly how you should do it?"

"Just say it!"

"You were young, naïve, and you never grew out of that silly schoolgirl crush on Sasuke," said Mebuki. "What? It's true!"

"Mom!"

"As much as it pains me to say this, though," Mebuki said, taking a deep breath, "I... respected your decision to marry Sasuke. I just didn't like it." Sakura stared, wide-eyed and mouth, at her mother. Her jaw moved on occasion, as if she was looking for something to say, but nothing came out. "And yes, I know what you're wondering; why didn't I do more to break you and Sasuke up? You're my daughter, Sakura. I love you too much to see you unhappy. That being said, I did try on occasion. Lot of good that did. And... I admit,

cutting you off after you stopped talking to was also wrong. I'm just glad you may have come to this realization on your own."

"Well, you got what you wanted," Sakura huffed. "Are you happy now?"

"Yes and no," said Mebuki. "Yes, because you finally left him. No, because... you're not happy. I saw how you acted around him. You were never yourself. You were more like a doormat for him. Changing who you are, pretending to be weaker, because of someone, isn't healthy.

"But you've been through a lot today," Mebuki continued. "Let's talk about something else for now."

"Okay. The Hokage's also getting divorced."

It was Mebuki's turn to stare, wide-eyed, and wide-mouthed. "That is... quite the coincidence that you're both getting divorced right now."

"And that's all it is!" Sakura declared. "I already know what people are going to think! 'Oh, he and you got divorced around the same time, that means you two were always in love and finally decided to get married!' or something like that.:

"You make that sound like a bad thing," Mebuki remarked. She paused, thinking about it. "Actually, that does sound bad. Like something out of a bad drama."

"I asked him if he was crazy, he said he wasn't," Sakura continued. "And this, right after Boruto got injured."

"Bad timing," Mebuki remarked. "The tabloids would have a field day over that."

"That's why we have to keep it secret until he decides to reveal it," said Sakura.

"And you? Are you telling anyone?"

"I'm not the Hokage," said Sakura. "So I don't have that problem. Although my slimy boss will suddenly take me back once he finds out. Just more evidence for my discrimination lawsuit, though."

"How's that going?"

"My lawyer told me that we're still building the case based on my recording of him," Sakura answered.

"That's what I wanted to hear," said Mebuki. "I'm genuinely proud of you, by the way."

Sakura smiled, sheepishly. "Thanks, mom." She looked away, considering her next question. "Did I really love Sasuke?"

"The fact that you're asking that tells me you never did," Mebuki answered. "As for why you did what you did... I think you let your desires overcome your need for happiness, and you suffered because of it. But you made your choice."

"And?"

"And it was the wrong choice, in the end. Desire isn't inherently bad, but it can be. I think your desire for Sasuke was unhealthy, which is bad."

"So, I still have to figure out what I saw in him?" Sakura asked.

"That's something you need to figure out for yourself," said Mebuki. "But, if there's a good thing to all of this, it's that you can finally move on from Sasuke. And I got a wonderful, adorable granddaughter out of it."

"Mooooommm," Sakura groaned.

Someone knocked at the door. Mebuki stood from the table and left the kitchen. Sakura waited, pouring some more sake. Expecting

someone random, like one of her mother's friends, Sakura wasn't prepared when her mother entered the kitchen, her arms crossed, just like her mood. At first, Sakura shrank from her mother, but seeing that Mebuki wasn't glaring at her, more to her, she came to the right conclusion, that a certain someone had come to her house. Sighing, she stood up and began to go to the door, but Mebuki put a hand on her shoulder.

"Please, Sakura, I don't want to see you get hurt or disappointed again," she said. "You two are not right for each other. And yes, that's my opinion, and you agreed with me. Take from it what you will, but I won't force you to do anything you don't want to do. Make the right decision."

Sakura nodded, but her expression betrayed her conflicted feelings.

Sasuke was waiting in the main foyer. He hadn't even taken his shoes off. He was looking away when he heard Sakura's footsteps. He turned, his arm out wide, but stopped. She crossed her arms, glaring at him. "Just get to the point," she said.

"Sakura, I'm sorry," he said. "I was being foolish for those 12 years, and I should have-"

"Why didn't you try to contact me?" she interrupted.

"Because of the mission," he answered.

"Uh-huh," she said. "But could you find a way to do it without revealing big secrets?"

"I, uh..." Sasuke paused, making Sakura roll her eyes again. His eyes darted all around, until they landed on Mebuki, standing behind her daughter, giving him a look that would have killed him a thousand times over. He knew Mrs. Haruno hated him. He once overheard her saying that she didn't care that his family was slaughtered, because of how he became a villain. And there was the

fact that he tried to kill her daughter on multiple occasions. He didn't care, although he should have.

He'd forgotten that he was talking to Sakura, not Mebuki, so he was startled when the former barked, "Well!?"

"I... didn't think of any," he said. He knew he said something utterly awful. But he was determined to get her back. "Sakura, I'm sorry. I was selfish for those twelve years, and I regret it. But could you please-"

"Will you stay longer than a day?" she asked. "Will you find a way to keep in touch?"

"I... can't guarantee that," he said. She laid her head back and sighed.

"You know, I can understand why you have to keep some distance, Curse of Hatred, you're a convicted criminal, and what not... but did you once bother to think about how I felt?"

"I do now," he said, pointing at his red, swollen cheek.

"Good," she said. "I'm glad you regret your actions. But I still don't know why I should go back to you. What did we see in each other, Sasuke?"

"To be honest, I don't know, either," he said. "Maybe we weren't good for each other after all. I felt like you were a parasite at times. And before you get angry, I understand that's wrong."

"But you tried to kill me several times, belittled me and left me behind with our daughter," said Sakura. "I get that neither of us is the good guy here. But you're worse."

Mebuki was pleased with her daughter for finally standing up to Sasuke, but she stayed out of the conversation. This was between Sasuke and Sakura. She'd already said her peace and could only

wait and see what happened next. She narrowed her eyes at Sasuke again, not to intimidate him-well, yes, she was trying to intimidate him, but only so he would remain honest.

Sakura clenched and unclenched her fist several times, then looked behind her at her mother. Mebuki backed off just enough, and Sakura released the breath she was holding. "Sorry. My mother thinks we should give this up."

"I know what your mother thinks."

"But getting back to *you* ; why should I take you back, when I don't have to?"

"I don't know," he said.

"Be honest, Sasuke," she said. "Do you love me? I mean, to the extent your family's Curse allows you to?"

Sasuke took a deep breath, sighed, and said, "No."

Sakura sighed, relieved. "Then we're finished, Sasuke. I don't know what I ever saw in you, just that you seemed so cool. And no, I don't love you anymore, either. It's for the best. We'll file the papers tomorrow. I'll allow you to see Sarada."

"Thank you," he said, turned and left.

Sakura stood there for a few more seconds. Then, overwhelmed, she collapsed onto her backside.

Mebuki motioned towards her. "Sakura, are you okay?" she asked.

"No," Sakura answered, her voice breaking. Afraid Sakura was in despair, she ran over to her, knelt and tried to comfort her, but when Sakura turned around, she saw that she was smiling a huge smile of relief. "I did it... I did it for myself, but I... I'm scared, mom."

"Oh, Sakura," Mebuki said, holding her arms out so her daughter could collapse into them and cry until she was too tired to cry. "It's okay, dear. You've had a long, long day." She understood that Sakura was still conflicted about the whole thing and would need some more time to really figure everything out, but she would be there with her as much as she could.

The Mebuki guestroom had two beds, and Sarada sat on top of one of them, legs crossed, playing with dolls with her grandpa, when she heard her mother crying, and sighed. "Great," she remarked. "Guess dad's never coming home again."

"Sorry, what?" Kizashi asked, looking up from the doll he held in his hand.

"Ah, forget it," Sarada sighed. "Now I'll never hear the end of it from Boruto."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, he was teasing me about my mom and dad getting divorced, and now they are!" she huffed. "Man! Stupid Boruto!"

"It's okay," said Kizashi. "If he's a problem, then Grandpa Kizashi will be there for ya!" He tackled her, pulling her into his lap while she screamed and laughed.

"Grandpaaaaa!"

Returning to work was rarely a relief, but Naruto felt that way the next morning. As soon as he entered the Hokage office building, the strong relief swept over him, making him straighten his posture. He didn't even know he'd been slouching. He'd also been thinking a lot about his upcoming divorce and how he'd break the news to Boruto, but those thoughts disappeared, again, after he entered the office building. But, then, Boruto won't be happy to hear that his dad really

like going to work and not being around him. Another reason to hate his dad!

A passing ninja brought him back to the real world. He was only able to see the ninja stopping and bowing to him out of the corner of his eye, before he forgot about them. He didn't even see their face. Oh, well.

"Good morning, Lord Hokage," one staffer remarked, walking past. It was over just as quickly as it happened. It was another little vignette in his life that was becoming an ongoing series of scenes and vignettes that had very little meaning and had no end in sight.

He sat at the desk, sighing. An aide dropped a hot cup of tea right next to him, along with a large stack of papers. Naruto's eyes widened, then squinted as he examined the stack of papers. Groaning, he fell back against the chair.

He looked up right as an aide entered his office.

"Lord Hokage?" the aide asked.

"Nothing, just cursing my lot," Naruto answered. "Is there anything I can help you with?"

"Oh, there's going to be an impromptu meeting of the Five Kages this afternoon... a video meeting! Not an in-person meeting!"

Naruto's heart sank like his body in the chair. "What is it about?"

"Oh, I spoke to an aide for Lord Gaara, says it's just a minor... routine meeting to discuss policy."

"Oh," said Naruto. They had one last month. The most heated discussion was about where to host the Chunin Exams, and...

Another idea came to Naruto, and he scribbled a little note, a reminder in case the subject came up, which it was almost certainly going to, a way to change things. He opened his desk drawer and

pulled out two pieces of paper; A letter from Fjordland military officers, expressing interest in helping the Land of Fire change its military practices. A passage was highlighted. It expressed surprise over the minimum age to enter the Ninja Academy. The other was from Konoha, furiously accosting Naruto for how her son was treated in the Chunin Exams. She was furious that he'd been deceived about the Exams. Naruto was sure the Academy students did know beforehand about the nature of the Chunin Exams, but judging by this letter, that was not the case, in this specific example.

But were the chunin exams even necessary anymore? He had a shadow clone think it over, writing down the pros and cons of keeping the chunin exams as they were, while he and two other shadow clones did the usual paperwork for the day.

Before he knew it, he heard his video conference app on his computer ringing, making him jump. *Wasn't it supposed to be in the afternoon?* Looking up at the clock, his question was answered. He'd worked all morning, only getting up to use the restroom, then returning to work. His stomach rumbled, too. He sighed, remembering what Boruto had said about his work habits numerous times previously. He kept the shadow clones going, but turned his attention to his computer screen.

The four other kages appeared on screen. Top left was Gaara. Top right was 6th Mizukage, Chojuro. Fourth Tsuchikage Kurotsuchi was on the bottom left, and Fifth Raikage Darui, on the bottom right.

"Good afternoon, everyone," said Naruto.

"What do you mean?" asked Darui.

"Ugh, let's not get into semantics," Naruto groaned.

"Good, because I don't want to, either," said Darui. "In case you haven't figured out, I'm chairing this meeting today." The kages all voiced their agreement. Naruto sat back in his chair to listen to the kages speak until it was his turn, where he gave an update on the

events of the past month, omitting his personal drama. For it's unnecessary during a meeting like this. The meeting's substance itself was primarily based around trade between the villages; mostly boring details that Naruto had almost literally heard hundreds of times before, right down to the growing trade deficit Sunagakure had with Kirigakure.

But before he knew it, the conversation took a different turn; the topic of the Chunin Exams eventually came up on the docket, as Darui pointed out while reading said docket. Naruto waited for an opportunity, then pulled out the sheet of paper that he'd written down his objections to the Chunin Exams on.

But before he knew it, Darui was wrapping up. "So, unless there are any objections, I suggest we keep the Chunin Exams format as is-"

"Do we really need to keep the Chunin Exams as is?" Naruto asked.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, we're living in what's supposed to be a peaceful time. Haven't the Chunin Exams served their purpose?"

"Oh, boy, HERE WE GO," Chojuro groaned. "Naruto's about to use his Talking Jutsu-"

"I'm not!"

"Not objecting?" Chojuro inquired.

"No, I'm not using Talk Jutsu, or whatever you just called it."

"What are your objections?" Darui asked.

"Let's start with the format," Naruto began. "We pit these kids against each other, so we can assess their progress, and decide who becomes a chunin..."

"Stop speaking the obvious!" Chojuro barked.

"I'm not finished!" Naruto barked back. "Anyway, we had one winner not too long ago, we passed him over for promotion, for what? A whim? The kid had high scores and everything! But the Tsuchikage hated him, so he wasn't promoted. How's that fair?"

"He was a petulant buffoon!" Kurotsuchi groaned.

"And you never told him why he wasn't promoted," Naruto finished.

"Why should I? It's tradition!"

"Some traditions have to end," said Naruto. "Like the gambling involved. We're gambling on kids!"

"And we make a lot of money off of betting!" said Kurotsuchi.

"On kids as young as 5!" Naruto objected. "Say there was a kendo tournament for kids, and they find out people are betting on something they're supposed to be doing for fun."

"That has nothing to do with the Chunin Exams, Lord Hokage, please get to your point," said Darui.

"My point is, betting on this competition is immoral, and opens the door to corruption."

"And yet, you never objected about it until now," said Kuro. "What happened? Have you been hanging out with those Fjordlanders?"

"Is that a bad thing?" Darui asked.

"... No."

"These kids already have enough pressures on them because of the exams," said Naruto. "We don't need them learning about betting to make it worse. And YES, yes, I know some kids already know, that's not the point!"

"Why don't you drop the gambling argument for now and focus on something else?" Gaara asked. Naruto glanced at his friend on the screen, suspecting that the Kazekage might be open to supporting his objections.

With renewed confidence, Naruto continued. "Most importantly, these exams downplay the viciousness and horrors of actual war, something we've been trying to move away from. I should've realized that after Boruto was caught cheating last time."

"So, what do you propose?" Dauri asked.

"We end the Chunin Exams as is," Naruto said, "Obviously. But if you absolutely need something to keep the tradition going, there might be a solution. Obviously, no more tournaments as exams for promotion, that should be handled by each village. What would replace it, I'm not sure." Then he remembered the hypothetical kendo tournament he mentioned earlier. "How about athletic competitions?"

"Athletic competitions?" Darui asked, "Like what those outsiders have?"

"Exactly!" Naruto exclaimed. "We have a friendly athletic competition to promote peace and understanding between the villages and the Five Lands."

"Are you sure?" Gaara asked.

"Gaara, *please*," Naruto hissed through his teeth, under his breath, pleadingly. "Back me up here!"

Naruto's suspicions that Gaara supported his ideas were confirmed when he said, "I agree with the Hokage. It is about time we really made an effort to change our martial cultures."

"You, too!?" Kuro sputtered.

"Do you have any objections to the Hokage's proposal?" Darui asked.

"Well, no, but... perhaps we should do more to study the Chunin Exam's downsides."

"Lord Mizukage?" Darui asked.

"I like the idea of an athletic festival," said Chojuro. "However, I too think we need to study the downsides of the Chunin Exams."

"I second the Hokage's proposal to end the Chunin Exams," Gaara confirmed.

"I didn't call a vote, but it seems we have already have a majority in favor," said Darui. "No need for procedure! But, just for the record, I'll call a formal vote. All in favor of ending the Chunin Exams, replacing them with a friendly athletic competition and forming a committee on the manner, say 'hai'."

"Hai!"

"Hai!"

"Hai!"

"Hai..."

"Hai! Wow! It's unanimous!"

Naruto sighed, surprised that it had been easier than he expected, just like his conversation with Hisashi.

"I hope you know what you're doing, Lord Hokage," said Kuro. "If you're just making this up as you go..."

"I know Naruto better than all of you," said Gaara, a sly smile on his lips, "He's definitely making this up as he goes."

Naruto groaned and sank back into his chair. "Ooohhhh, Gaaaaaraaaaaa, why'd you have to rat me out like thaaaat?"

Holy schnikes, I actually finished this chapter.

Thanks for your patience, everyone, and I apologize for taking so long. I don't have excuses, except that Life Happens. And in my case, a lot of life happened. I also had some second thoughts about this fic, but it's 18 chapters in, now, and it's important to finish this. But also, please don't ask, anonymously, if the fic is dead, in the reviews. I find that super rude, especially if you conclude that it's dead. It just means you're impatient and feel entitled to my content. So please, if you have questions about the progress, please ask me in my private messages. It's actually polite.

I appreciate the reviews, as long as they're constructive. If I've made any mistakes surrounding the lore and characters, please tell me. Hopefully I didn't fuck up too badly.

Chapter 19

The pamphlet's title was "So Your Marriage Failed". Naruto thought that the title was too on the nose, but still didn't hit as hard as he expected. If its title was, "So Your Marriage Was a Sham and Neither of You Wanted to Admit It Until Now", then he would have wondered if the author was thinking about him. Reading the inside, however, it became clear that it was aimed at both parties in the failed relationship... which was still a little bit on the nose, but this pamphlet, with lines like, "Sometimes people just fall out of love", or, "Sometimes the couple will disagree on money", was aimed at a general audience.

Across the table, Hinata read a different pamphlet, "Talking to Your Children About Divorce". And that subject, covered in the pamphlet his soon-to-be ex-wife was reading, was why we are with them today. Divorce papers were strewn around them on the table, signed and sealed, with the dates for the divorce to take effect written in ink at the top of the pages. It was now only a matter of "when" the divorce would happen. Thirteen years of marriage, wasted, and based on a lie, were set to end in a matter of weeks. There was time to transition the kids to be ready and get used to it, but telling them would not be easy.

Hence the pamphlet Hinata was reading.

"I don't know if I can do this," she groaned.

"You have to," he said, softly. Just because they were divorcing didn't mean he could become uncharacteristically callous.

"You try telling them," she replied. He sighed in defeat. He didn't want to do this, especially not now, while Boruto was still at home recovering. Himawari sat over on the couch watching TV, she was going to react about as normally as she could-still upset, but probably won't take it as personally as Boruto almost certainly will.

But then she could also react just as poorly, and both she and Boruto could end up getting super stressed, go down some bad path-maybe even get sick more often-and all sorts of bad things? This was why it was important to get this out of the way *now*, because their lives were going to be forever upended in the next few days or weeks, and they only had a short timeframe to break the news.

Hinata reached over to Naruto and squeezed his hand, but he didn't react. There were no goosebumps, no warm feelings, and especially, no reassurance. He looked at her, meeting her eyes, and still felt nothing. Neither did she, and she removed her hand from his. Yes, this was for the best, he decided. No sense keeping the lie going.

"It says here we should be calm all the way through," she said.

"It does?" He had read the pamphlet, but he couldn't be sarcastic right about now.

She nodded.

"What else does it say?"

"That we have to put up a united front, tell them it's not their fault and we still love them, and that we should apologize."

"Will they accept it?"

"There's only one way to find out."

For the fifth time that conversation, Naruto sighed.

" *Will you stop sighing? It's like there's an earthquake in here every five seconds!* " Kurama spat.

How can you tell? Naruto sarcastically replied.

" *Because... Shut up!* "

Against Kurama's wishes, Naruto sighed again. "Let's get this over with," he said.

Hinata nodded and stood up. The sound of the feet of her chair grinding on the wooden floor sounded louder than usual in this quiet house, and it startled Himawari, turning around to see what was going on. "Mama? What is it?" she asked.

"There's something your father and I have to tell you," said Hinata.

"Is it about the rumors that daddy and Sasuke-"

"No! No, it has nothing to do with that," Hinata interrupted. "Your father doesn't see Sasuke that way."

"Why don't we just all go into Boruto's room and discuss this there?" Naruto asked. Hinata nodded, gave Himawari a "Come with me" gesture, and exited the dining room with Naruto and Himawari. Their daughter could clearly see that there was some awkwardness between the two of them; they weren't holding hands, nor did they look at each other. Ten-year-old girls like Himawari could tell that something was up, and she visibly didn't like it, looking away from them both after they climbed the stairs and went to Boruto's room.

The boy in question was sitting up comfortably, reading a manga, when his parents and Himawari walked in. Looking at Himawari, Naruto gestured to Boruto's bed, and she sat down at the foot of it, while Naruto and Hinata sat on her bed, across from their kids. They sat there, silently, occasionally glancing at each other, at the kids, and back to each other, awkwardly. The palpable awkwardness extended to Boruto and Himawari, as they too shot awkward, confused glances at each other. It was a situation where neither side was sure of what was going to happen first, and who was going to make the first move, like two armies facing each other down, but unwilling to shoot the first arrow. Only this wasn't war, it was a family.

Finally, Naruto sighed (again) and spoke. "There's... something we need to tell you," he said. "And you're not gonna like it."

"You're ending the ninja program?" Himawari asked. Boruto glared at Naruto.

"Not yet," said Naruto. "But, it's... you're not gonna like it, especially not now."

"Your father and I have been going to marriage counselling, but we discovered something about ourselves," said Hinata. Boruto and Himawari were both visibly nervous, so Hinata smiled, warmly. "It has nothing to do with either of you, but we want you to know that we love you both very much. It's just..."

"... It's just that..." Time to get it over with. "Your mother and I didn't love each other as much as we thought we did." He could see the realization dawning on both their faces; their eyes and mouths widening in shock. "So we've agreed that... in a few weeks... we're no longer going to be married."

Boruto and Himawari stared at them. Three... two... one...

" *WHAT!?* " they screamed.

"You're doing this *NOW!?* " Boruto roared.

"Boruto, sweetie," Hinata said soothingly, "It has nothing to do with you."

"Then why are you separating!?"

"Sometimes, mommies and daddies don't love each other as much as they did, or thought they did," said Hinata.

"So they make mistakes," Naruto continued. "These things happen."

"We're not calling you mistakes," said Hinata, "We love you both very much. What your father means is, they make choices that seem like a good idea at the time... which, again, has nothing to do with you... that hurt them when they're older."

"And sometimes they lie to themselves, even though they hate it when people do that," Naruto added, averting his eyes from Boruto's hard glare.

"But mama," said Himawari, "What about us?"

"Don't worry," said Hinata. "The actual separation won't happen for a couple of weeks. I'll find a new place to live."

"And we've already set upon a schedule for which days you live at whose house," said Naruto. "You'll both see us equally."

Boruto scoffed. "Yeah, right! You're probably doing this now just because-"

"Brother, stop!" Himawari snapped.

"What's he talking about?" Hinata asked.

"It's the rumors again, isn't it?" Naruto asked, visibly annoyed. "NO, I don't like Sasuke that way. In fact, last time I saw him, I called him a dirty name. Now can we get back on topic?"

"Like I said," said Hinata, "We're doing this because your father and I never actually loved each other as much as we thought. It's for the best, but you're free to disagree."

"I disagree!" Boruto objected.

"Obviously," said Naruto. "If anything, I'm the most to blame for this. I chose to marry your mother, and I'm the one who decided to get divorced first. I didn't coerce her into this, either. In fact, she found her own reason to agree with me. And I'm thankful to her for understanding, and I'm sorry to her, and to you, for going through with this."

"Yeah, you'd better be!" Boruto snapped.

"Thanks for reminding me, Boruto," said Naruto. "Just know that things are going to change a little bit in the future. I'm staying here, at the Hokage residence. Your mom will probably go back to the Hyuuga estate."

"So I can see grandpa more!" Boruto said, his eyes sparkling.

"Yeah, sure," said Naruto.

"I'm not gonna be branded, am I?" Himawari asked, her voice shaking, tears welling up in her eyes.

"No, no!" Naruto said, calmly. "I talked to your grandpa, he's ending that practice." Himawari was visibly relieved... at not getting branded.

"You can't separate!" she pleaded.

"Please, understand, this is not your fault," said Hinata. "It's our fault that things have gotten this way. In the end, we were not the right fit for each other."

"What do you mean?" Boruto asked.

"Sometimes, the person we want isn't the person we need," said Naruto. "I thought the same thing with regards to Sakura Uchiha, towards your mother, but now I don't know who I need."

"Dad, we don't need self-reflection right now," said Himawari.

"Sure... Boruto, I'm really sorry. Everything just... happened. I was under a lot of stress, and, I decided now was a good time to do it."

"Yeah, when I'm hurt!" Boruto snapped.

"Do you think I haven't considered that-" Hinata held him in place, pushing him back onto the bed. After a couple deep breaths, he hung his head. "Go ahead and be mad at me. I deserve it, don't I?"

"Duh!" Boruto replied. He crossed his arms and snapped his head to the side, but he was audibly trying to keep his voice from breaking. Unsure of what else to say, Naruto sighed for like the hundredth time, stood up, and left the room, Hinata following. They closed the door, but Naruto lingered long enough to hear Boruto start to cry. It *pain* fully drove home the fact that his pursuit of his own life's meaning had the potential to ruin everything his son wanted to do, perhaps permanently driving a wedge between them both if he didn't do something to fix their relationship. Or Boruto could get over it once he found out things weren't going to change too much.

If only he had a father to go to. But then again, Iruka-sensei, and Yamato-sensei were both available. Maybe he could learn from them.

"I'd like to file for..." Sakura gulped, "Divorce." Did she really say that?

"These things happen, 200 ryo, please," said the clerk.

Grimacing, Sakura wished the clerk, who obviously had to keep a professional attitude, could be at least a little bit sympathetic. But with no time to dwell on it, she pulled out the money and handed it to the clerk. Then the clerk handed her the necessary paperwork. "Is your husband with you?" the clerk asked.

"No," Sakura answered. "But I'm allowed to sign this in his stead."

"Eh."

Doing the paperwork itself was easier than she expected. Since it was a divorce by mutual consent, she didn't need her lawyer, but he was with her anyway, hanging out in the back, just in case. She filled out the visitation form, stating that Sasuke would be allowed to see them, but she was taking sole custody of Sarada, which they had already agreed upon, and wasn't going to change anything for Sarada. She was used to living alone with her mother, anyway, this

was just making it official. They would start looking for a new place to work as soon as her still-rocky financial and work status were sorted out.

And that's why, instead of sad, Sakura felt relieved. Her lawyer had noticed it when she arrived at the courthouse, posture upright and head held high. An eyebrow raise and a grin were all she needed to know that he had noticed something different about her.

("What's going on?" she asked.

"You look different," he said.

"How?"

"Well... you look... happy... ish.")

Sakura pursed and rolled her lips to stop herself from smiling. Like it would matter to the clerk, though. She wasn't focused on her, just the paperwork she had to do. Her cavalier, nonchalant attitude told Sakura enough, anyway.

It didn't matter. As soon as she finished the paperwork, she released a long breath, like she'd emerged from the water with a weight around her chest. Her story with Sasuke, which took up almost 2/3 of her life, was finally over. She was free; free to move on and find someone she could happily spend the rest of her life with. Also, she had finally let part of her past go. She wasn't that silly little schoolgirl with a crush on the bad boy anymore.

As she departed, her lawyer nodded again, and they both left, feeling confident. Then, her lawyer spoke up.

"So... about the hospital."

Her demeanor came crashing back to earth like a bird hit by a rock.

"What do you suggest?" she asked.

"First, I'd tell your boss," he answered. "I have a feeling his attitude will change, but that won't hurt our case."

"I hope not."

"Don't worry too much about it. The case is my specialty."

She didn't protest. He was right, after all. The Law was his specialty, and medicine was her specialty, and according to one philosopher, the world would be better if everyone knew their place in society. Yet she also felt that, while that idea made some sense, it fit professional occupations better than home and family life. While it didn't quite fit her life and situation, she admitted, she wondered if the philosophy had done more harm than good in the home in general. She couldn't answer that, because she neither a philosopher, nor a reporter, and that question would go unanswered. Her problem was the fact that she was a doormat in regard to one specific person who was now out of her life.

"Wanna get lunch?" she asked.

"I'm married," he answered.

"Not that kind of lunch," she replied.

"Friendly lunch. Got it. Is Sarada invited?"

"Let's ask her," Sakura answered.

She sat on a bench, bored. They didn't need to ask her. It was written all over her face, and the way she kicked her legs. Sakura walked up to Sarada and said, "Hey, sweetie, ready to go?"

"Yeah," Sarada answered, her tone also showing her boredom.

"We're going to get some lunch, want to come along?"

"No," Sarada moaned.

"Why not?"

"All you'll do is talk about your boring grown-up stuff, and I don't wanna hear it."

"Are you mad about the Chunin Exams?"

"How could the Hokage do that!?" Sarada snapped.

"Because he thought it over, and decided it was best to end them," said Sakura.

"I think I'll go visit Boruto." Sarada got off the bench but waited for Sakura and the family lawyer to pass by, first, before following them out. Once outside, she walked off in a different direction from Sakura and the lawyer.

Along the route to the Hokage residence, she met up with Mitsuki. He told her he wasn't busy, so he could go with her wherever... she was going. After telling him she was visiting Boruto, he seemed to brighten up, and eagerly followed her on the way to the Hokage residence. Along the way, they stopped at Ino's flowershop to pick up a card and some chocolates. Inojin wanted to go, but he was too busy helping his mom and dad, since Sakura had the day off from the flower shop, and he believed that she would inevitably go back to the hospital full-time. When they were done, they left the flower shop and headed straight for the Hokage residence, passing by the big TV screen showing a news story with the chyron, "KAGES AGREE TO END CHUNIN EXAMS; DECISION HAD BEEN YEARS IN THE MAKING, WILL LOOK INTO REPLACEMENT".

Boruto's house looked the same from the outside, once they arrived, but that quickly changed as soon as they entered, for they found a box filled with personal items sitting in the foyer. After removing their shoes, they looked inside, saw nothing interesting, and moved on. Freyja, the farmer's wife from Fjordland, was in the kitchen, making snacks. Boruto sat on one of the two chairs facing each other, legs up, watching TV. His crutches laid against the chair facing him, and

he was doing his best not to move. He was also scowling. Unaware of what had taken place days earlier, Sarada and Mitsuki walked up to him, brightly greeting him.

"Hey, Boruto!" Sarada announced. Boruto flinched and then winced. "Oops, sorry."

"Do you need a massage?" Mitsuki asked, arm extending to Boruto, who shook his head.

"Oh! Sarada! Mitsuki!" said Freyja. "I did not know you were coming."

"We won't be long," said Sarada. She and Mitsuki sat down at the dining table. Freyja placed some stuffed prunes on the table. Confused, Sarada and Mitsuki stared at them, picked one each, and ate them. Sarada spat hers out. Mitsuki did not.

"What are you doing here?" asked Boruto.

"My mom and her lawyer are hanging out, so I thought I'd stop by," said Sarada. "She just got divorced."

"Divorced!?" Boruto spat. "My mom and dad are getting divorced, too!"

"Huh!?" Sarada's head snapped to the left, ignoring Mitsuki.

"Whaddaya mean, 'divorced'!?" Boruto went over what happened.

"Seriously!?" Sarada stammered when he finished. "What the heck is going on!?"

"I don't know!" Boruto whined.

"What if-what if your dad and my mom are doing this because they're still in love with each other and-and-and they're just starting to-OW!"

"How dare you accuse your parents of such scandalous behavior!" Freyja scolded, retracting her hand from smacking Sarada upside the head.

"You didn't have to hit me!"

"But isn't it strange that Boruto's father and Sarada's mother are divorcing their spouses at the same time?" Mitsuki asked.

"Coincidence," said Freyja. "Life is not a soap opera."

"Yeah, yeah, what-HEY! How did you know the Hokage was getting divorced!?" Sarada asked.

"Because you children speak louder than Thor!" Freyja scoffed.

"Who's Thor?"

"My god," Freyja sighed.

They heard the door opening and slamming shut. They expected Hinata, but the heavy footfalls told them otherwise. Naruto entered, took off the Hokage cloak and placed it on the back of a chair.

"Work's

been slow today. Hello, Sarada, Mitsuki and Freyja." He went over to Boruto and squatted in front of him. "How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Better," said Boruto. Naruto smiled, chuckling.

"I knew Dr. Uchiha was the best one for the job," said Naruto.

"Dr. Uchiha?" Mitsuki asked. Naruto stood up, nodding. "Dr. Uchiha divorced Sasuke today." He said, smiling. Sarada stared at him, mouth agape.

"Huh!?" Naruto asked, eyes blank. "Whaddaya mean, 'divorced'!?"

"Oh, I guess you and Dr. Uchiha weren't having some torrid affair and decided to get divorced at the same time," Mitsuki continued.

"Divorced!? What-" Naruto stammered and sputtered. "How did-how did you know I was getting divorced?!"

"Boruto told us," Mitsuki continued, still smiling.

"And now I know," said Freyja. "Keep me out of your personal drama!"

"Gladly," said Naruto. "Sarada, what happened? Why's your mom getting divorced?"

Sarada told as much of the story as she could, leaving out the parts she wasn't sure about, or wasn't there to hear. It became clearer to the kids that Naruto really didn't know what was going on with Sakura's love life, because his confused expression remained the whole time, until Sarada got to the part where Sakura socked Sasuke's jaw, calling him something very mean and nasty. At this, Naruto threw his head back and laughed.

"Aw, man, and I'd just insulted Sasuke that day, too! Hahahaha! About time she divorced him, to be honest."

"You wanted them to divorce!?" Sarada asked, indignantly. "Why didn't you say anything!?"

"Hey, she's her own person, who am I to tell her what to do?" Naruto replied. "Who knows? This might be the best thing that's ever happened to her. Where is she now?"

"Having lunch with our lawyer," said Sarada.

"Ah, so I guess her lawsuit's still going forward?" said Naruto. Sarada nodded.

"Why are you and Lady Hinata getting divorced?" Mitsuki asked.

"Oh, we both came to the conclusion that we're not right for each other, and our marriage needed to end," Naruto answered. He didn't say "Our marriage was a mistake based on a lie" because Boruto

was right there, and still smarting from the conversation they'd had two days ago. In fact, he was glaring at Naruto right now, and Naruto knew it.

"So where are you staying?" Naruto asked, changing the subject.

"With my grandma and grandpa," said Sarada. "Y'know, it'd be nice if we could go on a mission."

"Well, you're not," Naruto answered. "Not yet, anyway." Sarada moaned and groaned, but Freyja, coming back into the kitchen carrying rice balls, glared at her, silencing her.

"That's good, if you ask me," she said. "Children do not belong on the battlefield."

"But you were a warrior!" Sarada countered.

"When I turned 18, I was allowed to become a shieldmaiden," Freyja said proudly. "My first battle was with an army from the southeast. Technologically, we were more like you during your father's time, except invaders from a land east of us, trying to force their ways upon us. We lured them into a trap and slaughtered them." Her eyes darkened with bloody nostalgia. It didn't scare the kids. They were in awe of this badass warrior lady.

"How many people did you kill?" Sarada asked, her eyes sparkling.

"How many breads have you had in your life?" she asked.

"Okay, okay!" Naruto said. "Please don't give them any ideas."

"But we wanna hear!" Boruto interjected. Naruto groaned and furrowed his eyes.

Then he felt a punch to his arm. He turned and saw Himawari. He was lucky she didn't hit him as hard as she did on his Hokage inauguration day. "So, you're *not* a shadow clone," she said.

"Just say you're mad at me," said Naruto.

"Where's mom?" she asked anyway.

"She's out with Tenten and Ino," said Naruto. "I think they're having lunch together. I'll call her."

Hinata had wondered what Sakura was doing with some other man at the same restaurant she, Ino and Tenten went to, but now that her soon-to-be-ex-husband told her, it made a lot of sense.

Soon-to-be-ex-husband...

Those words came off her thoughts' tongue like ajiu. Even as she smiled at Sakura, noting how different she looked, now that she'd divorced Sasuke, the coincidental events connecting them didn't go unnoticed. How mad should she be at Naruto? That thought had to wait, Ino pulled on her elbow, bringing her to the bar, behind which the chefs were busy making food, sushi being the most visible. They sat down. Ino placed herself in between, from the chef's perspective, Tenten on the left, and Hinata on the right. Ino and Tenten were both eager to start on some sushi, and that's what they ordered. However, Hinata was still visibly feeling the blues.

"Come on, what's wrong?" Ino asked.

Hinata glanced aside, sighing. She whispered, "I'm getting divorced."

Tenten spat out the beer she was drinking. "WHAT!?" Ino shushed her.

"What do you mean!?" Ino whispered.

"I mean, I'm getting divorced," said Hinata. "And the timing couldn't be better." Obvious sarcasm was obvious.

"Damn, right now?" Ino asked.

"No quite."

"Oh, so you've got time. Look on the bright side! You'll be a free woman again soon!"

"Should I be bitter? Naruto wanted to do this."

"To be honest... a little, but not too much," said Ino. "I didn't think you two were compatible, anyways." She ignored Hinata's almost-offended stare to focus on the sushi samples placed in front of her. When she acknowledged it, "What? It's true."

"Thanks a lot," Hinata sarcastically said again.

"I'm not saying you can't be bitter," said Ino. She picked up a piece of sushi and stuffed it in her mouth. "Jusht, look on the bright shide."

"Am I the bad guy?" Hinata asked.

"How should I know?" Ino asked again.

"Never mind," Hinata sighed. She turned around, looking at Sakura. "Sakura's getting divorced, too."

"Really!?" Ino blurted. Fortunately for her, the noise in the restaurant was loud enough that Sakura couldn't hear her. But that didn't stop Tenten from putting a hand over her mouth. "About time."

"Good for her," Hinata said, genuinely proud. Then, she turned, and stared off into the distance. The chef thought she was looking at him, at first, then figured out she wasn't looking at anything in particular, and went back to his work.

"Naruto and Sakura are still in love with each other," she said.

Tenten spat out the beer she was drinking, but Ino didn't. Realizing this, Ino said, in about as fake surprised as one could get, "Oh, my goodness!"

"Are you kidding me!?" Tenten blurted out after coughing up the beer that went down the wrong pipe. "So, like, they must be planning to get married or something!"

"Naruto didn't sound like he knew," Hinata answered.

"Oh, so it's just a coincidence," said Tenten. (It really was just a coincidence.)

"So, what are you going to do?" Ino asked.

"Naruto wants my father to end the Branch House practice," she said. "And I'll see to it that it's finished. It's what Neji would've wanted."

"Good," said Ino. "And Sakura?"

Hinata turned back to look at Sakura. She sighed. "I want to be mad at both of them, but I'm not. They'd better not mess this up."

End chapter

For this story, I'm drawing on some of my experiences with my parents, who were also divorced, but I had to look up information on how parents can tell their kids they're divorcing. I don't remember any conversation I had with my parents about it, because they divorced when I was three years old, and got used to it pretty quickly. In fact, the only things I remember about that time, were, that at one point, they slept in separate bedrooms, and the other memory that stands out, was moving into the house that I'd grow up in with my mom. My parents split custody; I spent Sundays (and some Saturdays) through Thursday with my mom and spent the weekends with my dad. He moved around often, so I spent my formative years living in five towns, all in the same suburban region.

The reason I had the kids discuss everything going on, was because I wanted them to act like sort of a Greek chorus. Think C-3P0 and

R2-D2, except they're major players in this little play. And the reason I'm making fun of soap operas, is because I don't want this to come across as a soap opera, because it's not. The reason I had Himawari hit Naruto was to show two things. One: The kids were going to be mad at him for longer than a day. Two: That it was actually him, not a shadow clone.

My biggest concern is that I could accidentally make Naruto the "bad guy". There is no bad guy in this story... well, except the dude who hurt Boruto, but that's beside the point. My main hope to combat this, is by showing that Naruto knows he's not coming across well, even though he's just as much at fault for this marriage as Hinata. At the same time, I don't believe they're at fault. They just made a bad choice. Obviously, I won't say that in the narrative, because they do love their kids, and don't want to call them a mistake.

I do have the rest of the story planned out, but please, if there's way I can make Naruto more sympathetic, what would you suggest? And how bitter and angry at Naruto should Hinata be? The plan is to make them amicable exes, so I'd appreciate the input.

(And yes, you may make that joke, wrt Freyja's bread question)

And as always, thanks for reading!

Chapter 20

"He can't eliminate the Chunin Exams!" Homura Mitokado was about as apoplectic as he could be in his age.

"He's going to try, anyway," Koharu Utatane replied, setting her teacup down on the table between them without bothering to look at Homura.

"I *know* he's going to try, that's not what I meant! What's next? He dissolves our council?!"

"Two people hardly makes a council," said Utatane.

"We can't let him continue! He may even end the ninja system!"

"Which was his goal," Utatane replied. "I'm just amazed we have this much influence over him for so long. Still... we must do what we can to protect our traditions. I fear that we will lose ourselves if things change more drastically than they already have.

"But he may have an opportunity to express our opinions," Utatane continued. "He has invited military advisors from Fjordland. I overheard Shikamaru discussing it with him."

"Fjordland?" Mitokado spat. "Is he begging for trouble?"

"He is weak. His son should have handled that bandit more easily, but he is using it as an excuse."

"Of course, he is," said Mitokado. "What do you suggest we do?"

"We send him a warning," she said. "I will *not* see the end of our system, especially not when the people-" She stopped, paused, and thought it over. "If he cannot accumulate public support for his plans..."

"What can we do? Unseat him?"

"Well, no, but..."

"Who would listen to us?" Mitokado asked.

"Who wouldn't?" she replied.

Buried in his work again, Naruto didn't hear the door of his office opening, and the subsequent footsteps, until he heard the knocking on his desk. Looking up, he gasped to see Hinata standing there, arms at her side. "Hinata," he acknowledged, putting his pen down.

"Overworking yourself again, I see," she said, voice neutral. If things hadn't changed, there's no doubt her voice would be softer, worried, instead of a simple observation. It makes Naruto feel worse.

"Are you mad at me?"

"A little."

"Because..."

"Because the marriage counsellor's behavior was unprofessional," she said.

"I know, I talked to him and he apologized-"

"He was still right," she interrupted. "Anyway, that's not what I'm here to talk about."

"It's goodbye, isn't it?" Naruto asked.

"And to tell you that I heard about the end of the branch family."

"Yeah, it was easier than I thought," he said, chuckling. His demeanor changed, seeing that she wasn't laughing, nor so much as smiling.

"I was supposed to do that," she said.

"Oh, right, I forgot," he sighed. "Sorry, I shouldn't have."

"But I could still hold him to his promises," she added. "I still have some things I need to discuss with him."

Naruto nodded. "Good luck."

"Thank you," she said. "And I'll tell Neji that I'm sorry." Naruto felt his heart clench, hurt. But he nodded anyway, as he watched the woman he'd lived his life with for 13 years walked out of his office, and partially out of his life.

"Wait!" he said, before she was totally out the door. She stopped, turned around. "Do you regret it?"

"Regret what?"

"Regret... this!" He waved his arms to convey "everything".

To his surprise, she smiled and shook her head. "Not really. For a while, I was happy. And I have two wonderful children. So, thank you, Naruto. And I'm sorry, too."

"Thank you," he said. "And I forgive you." Now, she smiled again, nodded, and left.

He sighed, leaned back in his chair and ran his hands through his hair. Was it getting longer? He didn't have time to get a haircut lately.

Anyways, the end of his marriage wasn't with a bang, but a whimper. He couldn't have known 13 years ago that marrying Hinata would lead to this, the emotional equivalent of a slow, cloudy, autumn day. Okay, it wasn't *officially* official yet-he still needed to fill out all the required paperwork-but it felt that way. Granted, not a whole lot was looking to change. He would still see Bortuo and Himawari, either on the weekends or during the week, and he would probably still have

to go to the Hyuuga compound to celebrate birthdays and such. Other than that, he knew things were changing.

How did it go so wrong? Why did he have to marry Hinata? Okay, as mentioned repeatedly, he was under no obligation to return Hinata's feelings for him, especially after seeing the genjutsu. He said he didn't know what real love was, but that was a lie. He knew what love was, it's just that... he was so overwhelmed that Hinata was so devoted to him, that he naively decided to return her feelings, when he had the pick of the village! Heck, he could've married Ino, instead. She and him had a little bit of chemistry, after all. But Hinata was still a little selfish, he just realized, but isn't everyone, in their own way? Maybe not. But now, for the first time, it felt like he had actual control over his life, and which direction he wanted it to go.

How did everything go wrong?

He concluded that he'd lied to himself for all those years. Rubbing his face, he remembered that time he'd told Sakura, "I hate people who lie to themselves!" Turns out, he was lying to himself the whole time, about his feelings for Hinata, and his happiness about his life. Nothing like good, old-fashioned self-loathing, right?

" *Man, what's with all the self-loathing?*" Kurama asked.

Where have you been?

" *Same place I've always been.*"

Ha, ha, very funny.

" *So now what?*"

I don't know.

" *That's it? I thought you were going to get your life in order!*"

I don't know how I'm going to do that!

" Oh, but you're going to change the Ninja System, end the Cycle of Hate and give everyone ramen, et cetera, et cetera, all by yourself!?"

I didn't mean it like that...

" Hey, I'm glad you're finally taking life by the balls. But even you need help."

Will you help?

" You expect a fox spirit to know anything about-"

Okay, I get it! You're no help, anyways.

" Thanks!"

You're welcome.

"Lord Hokage?" Naruto nearly jumped out of his seat, and remembered he was still in his office. Shikamaru had some paperwork in his hands, with a confused look on his face. "Were you talking to Kurama?" he asked.

"Yeah, sorry. Got anything for me?"

"Just some paperwork," said Shikamaru.

"Thanks," Naruto said, taking the paperwork.

"And... I'm sorry I argued with you about-"

"About what?" Naruto was genuinely confused.

"Never mind," said Shikamaru.

"Okay," said Naruto. "I don't suppose you know how to change the Ninja System?"

"I do know that our economy relies on it, among other things," Shikamaru answered.

"Well, that makes things easier," Naruto quipped, causing Shikamaru to chuckle.

"We could ask the Council," said Shikamaru.

"Those old farts? No way."

Shikamaru scoffed a laugh. "Of course not," he said. "You're not thinking of doing this all by yourself, are you?"

"Uh, what?"

"You're think of doing this by yourself, aren't you?" Shikamaru repeated, but snarkier.

"... No?" Shikamaru stared at him, unamused.

"Okay, let's try to figure this out," Shikamaru sighed. "Are we totally getting rid of ninjas?"

"Probably not."

"So, how are we going to change the system if things kinda-sorta stay the same?"

"How should I know?" Naruto asked.

"Everyone else but the Land of Iron uses shinobi," said Shikamaru. "I don't know-" He paused, looked up at Naruto, and they shared a wordless conversation that lasted seconds, but felt longer. Promptly, Naruto pulled out a piece of paper, wrote some things down, and bounced ideas off Shikamaru, who bounded ideas off Naruto, and the two brainstormed their ideas, until Naruto handed it to Shikamaru.

"An all-volunteer standing army under civilian oversight, complete with samurai, regular soldiers *and* ninja," he said.

"We need to see if it's feasible," said Naruto.

"I'll send this to the Daimyo," said Shikamaru, not needing Naruto to give him the order.

"Then what are you waiting for!?" asked Naruto. Shikamaru turned and bolted out the door. Naruto sat back against his chair, sighing.

"Wow, that was... I didn't know you had it in you," said Kurama. "You wouldn't have thought of that earlier."

Is that an insult?

"Nah."

"I told you, Dr. Uchiha-I mean, Haruno-failed that patient," the Chief of Medicine insisted.

"Then why did you reduce her hours?" Sakura's lawyer asked. The Chief of Medicine squirmed in his chair, making the only sounds in his office, while Sakura, seated next to her lawyer to the CoM's right, stared at him. "Sir, we have you *on tape* admitting that you cut her hours because of her family name."

"No, I told you, it was punishment for a failed surgery-"

"That's not what you said on the tape!" Sakura's lawyer interrupted.

"Please do not interrupt my client again," the hospital's lawyer finally spoke up. "Sir, the only reason we're even meeting with you is because of her publicity stunt."

"If it was just a publicity stunt, we wouldn't be here," said Sakura's lawyer. "Sasuke Uchiha may not be the most popular figure in the village, but all those complaints you got-"

"Do you have the tape proving what my client said about her?" the hospital's lawyer asked.

"Yes, in fact, I do," said Sakura. She reached into her bag, pulled out a tape recorder and set it on the desk.

"A recording!?" the hospital lawyer spat. "That's a violation of hospital rules. If you-"

"Please, let her play the recording," said Sakura's lawyer.

As she had been instructed not to unnecessarily speak or risk damaging her case, Sakura nodded and pressed play on the recorder. Most of the recording went on as Sakura had remembered it, the Chief of Medicine praising her, but not telling her if he was going to bring her back full-time or not. The part where he insulted her for botching that one surgery, however, made her sigh, frustrated, at being forcibly reminded of her failures, and the Chief of Medicine's smug expression. However, she didn't wither, because she knew what was coming up, near the end, and it finally came.

" No one's complained about your last name, even though Sasuke Uchiha is a traitor, terrorist, murder who got off easy because he was friends with the Hokage. Let's face it, the Uchiha have been a parasite on this village. Just because they helped found it doesn't mean they have the right to act like spoiled children and cause a war when they don't get their way. Curse of Hatred. Puh! Lousy excuse! "

The Chief of Medicine's own words wiped that smug look off his face, and she could see him starting to sweat. She kept her face neutral, but the satisfaction was already starting to build.

"That doesn't prove anything!" the hospital's lawyer objected.

"Well, personally I agree with the Chief of Medicine about the Uchiha, but that's not the point," said Sakura's lawyer. "The point is, we can prove that the Chief of Medicine used her malpractice complaint as an excuse for demotion."

"She lost a patient-"

"She's lost more than just that one patient," said the lawyer. "And yet you chose *that particular* patient as the right time to demote her. Were there limits?"

"No," said the hospital lawyer. "But a doctor's duty is to do no harm and do what they can for every patient."

"And according to the records, she did just that," her lawyer answered. "My client is willing to acknowledge that things can go wrong in medicine."

"And why should this incident be swept under the rug?"

"My client has lost patients before, but was never punished," said Sakura's lawyer, "In fact, she had once volunteered to go on one-month *paid* administrative leave for misdiagnosing a patient's appendicitis."

"What happened?" asked the hospital lawyer.

"The previous administration declined her request and she continued to work," said Sakura's lawyer.

"It was an honest mistake," Sakura added.

"The Chief of Medicine's comments, adding his actions, and her previous records, show that Dr. Uchiha was discriminated against, because of her last name," her lawyer continued. "Look, we don't have to take this to trial. But if we do, then the public opinion on the Uchiha clan might not matter. She already took it public."

"And your point is?"

"Look, the hospital has more to lose if we take this to trial," said Sakura's lawyer, visibly tired of this silly game. "We already have evidence the Chief of Medicine discriminated against her, she's a

war hero, and a good doctor with the Hokage's backing. Just agree to accept her back full-time and pay her lost wages."

"I do *not* want an Uchiha on my pay-" The Chief of Medicine froze, his expression one of self-inflicted horror. He let out a long sigh and sat back in his chair. He didn't meet his lawyer's glare, preferring to stare off into the distance, past the smirking Sakura and her lawyer. After several silent moments, he sighed, took out a piece of paper, signed it, and handed it to his lawyer. The lawyer looked it over, and his eyes grew wide. Wordless, he passed the piece of paper to Sakura and her lawyer. They examined it, and both sets of eyes went as wide as the hospital's lawyer.

"That's a lot of money," said Sakura.

"More than you lost out on," said the lawyer.

"Will I still get to do the fun stuff?" she asked.

"Attending Physician is flexible in enough in your case," said the Chief of Medicine. "And yes, that means you can still perform surgery."

"SHAAAAN-NA-ROOOOOOOO!" She jumped out of her seat, but realized they were all staring at her. She chuckled sheepishly and bowed. "Thank you so much!"

Heeeeeeyyyy, sorry it took me so long to do this, and sorry it's so short. I had an idea of how I wanted to "reform" the Ninja World, thought about it for a long time, even considered the downside of the idea. A few examples from history had to remind me of how things could get out of hand, to say the least, but I think the solution could be plausible. In the end, the solution Naruto and Shikamaru came up with is pretty much what I think could happen. I also understand that this will have to be presented to the public, too.

Thanks for reading!

Chapter 21

Even though Ino was thrilled Sakura was welcomed back to the hospital full-time, the sudden rush of customers today had her cursing the timing. There was no major holiday approaching, just families deciding to spend their money. Despite no genin and chunin missions going on, the Hokage had the genuinely good idea to pay them anyway, something Ino believed might be at least partially causing the rush.

Sai filled in as best he could, but he wasn't Sakura. More than one customer had come up to her, complaining that his smile seemed forced, coming across derisively. She had to tell him to at least *try* to make his smile look genuine, but not force it, lest he scare them with that One Smile he made once. That one not only haunted her nightmares, but it also sent baby Inojin into an hours-long crying fit.

Eventually, coming to a correct conclusion, Ino relieved him of his cashiering duties, moving him to the floor so he could tend to the flowers and arrangements themselves. The overall mood of the customers changed instantly, in a lighter mood.

She still wished Sakura was here.

(People would joke that she was in love with Sakura, like how they joked Sasuke and Naruto were secretly lovers. She would have to ignore that)

The rush gradually slowed as the day went on, allowing Ino to take a break, for lack of a better term, from cashiering for long stretches. And speaking of rumors, it was while she was fidgeting with some arrangements, that she noticed something.

Three older ladies, holding the arrangements they had already purchased a few minutes earlier were still huddled around each other, swapping gossip. Judging by their faces, whatever it was must

have been juicy. Ino could not resist moving to overhear them, but at a far enough range for them not to notice. Using her ninja training, she trained her ears on their conversation. She happened in on it just in time to hear something extra juicy.

"So anyway, I hear the Hokage's getting' divorced!"

"Shhh! Don't say that!"

"What? Why not?"

"Cuz you don't know that for sure!"

"Well, I'll tell you, I heard it from a friend of a friend, who takes knitting classes with the Hokage's wife, and she said it's true!"

"Whom, the Hokage's wife?"

"No, my friend!"

"Well, that's not a good source!"

"Well, anyway, she said the Hokage's wife hasn't talked much about her husband lately, and you know how she usually was, obsessed with him and such. Then, one day, she comes into knitting class, saying nothing! I don't know what happened."

Ino did know. To an extent. Hinata told her personally, that Naruto and she were getting divorced, and that he was still in love with Sakura. She also knew that. As far as she knew, they still hadn't announced it yet, but rumors can spread faster than the flu.

" *And* I heard Sakura Uchiha punched her husband."

"What!? How could she do that!?" Ino had to stop herself from laughing. That she didn't know, but it sounded awesome, and totally Sakura. Too bad the old bag who just shamed her thought otherwise.

"You don't think they're planning something, do you?"

"What?"

"They were in love with each other, I heard. The Hokage was just enthralled with her."

"Ugh, first she punches her husband, then shacks up with the Hokage. What's the world coming to?"

"Hey, don't be so hard on Dr. Uchiha. She saved my knee!"

"Wait, what are you insinuating?" The third woman finally interjected.

"Isn't it obvious? They got bored with their spouses and are going to marry each other! Shameful!"

Once again, Ino had to stop herself from laughing. That rumor could not have been further from the truth...

But she would have to tell Sakura about that... after she finished her next plan. Better keep those rumors away from her.

"Where did you hear about Sakura Uchiha punching her husband?"

"Well, I heard it from a friend of a friend-"

"Oh, come off it!"

Ino couldn't hold back her laughter anymore, it was like a loud belch of laughing that caught the old ladies' attention. Unfazed, Ino glanced at them, then back at her work. "I'm sorry, I was thinking of something funny," she said.

The old ladies showed they didn't believe her one bit by walking out of her shop with their purchases in hand. As soon as they were out the door, Iruka-sensei stepped inside as if he was waiting for them to leave. Actually, from how he looked to see if they were out of earshot, he had waited for them to leave.

"Juicy gossip, huh?" he asked.

"How do you think it slipped out?" Ino asked, making Iruka-sensei shrug.

"Ah, you know how people are," he said.

"Yeah, I see," she said. "So, what, or who are you here for?"

"Well, I'm looking for something for Kakashi," he said, a soft smile on his lips and a blush coloring his cheeks, "But I also wanted to, you know, what's next?"

"We get them together," Ino answered.

"So soon?"

"Why, what's wrong with that?"

"I don't know if Naruto's ready for that yet," said Iruka-sensei. "This whole thing's just been so emotionally draining for him."

"He's got to get back out there."

"So soon after getting divorced? Might not look good."

"Nobody knows yet-OH, right, rumors," said Ino.

"Look, if we're going to do this, we'll have to be careful not to cause any big emotional... things," said Iruka. "And I'm certain the kids won't like it, either."

"Psssst! Don't worry, I know what I'm doing," said Ino. "One blind date and they'll be all over each other!"

Iruka-sensei admired her enthusiasm for helping her old romantic rival. "You guys have changed so much," Iruka-sensei remarked.

"Sakura deserved better," Ino replied.

"Indeed, she did," said Iruka. "She didn't get to define herself, did she? While that's true, my main concern is, what if they don't want this? They might not be ready."

"Like I said, I know what I'm doing," said Ino. "Just trust me on this, okay?"

"We're not having ramen again, are we dad?" Himawari asked.

Naruto paused, his fingers on the phone, ready to dial Ichiraku's. "Uh... no, we're not," he answered. He put the phone down and went over to the apartment's couch. Himawari stared at him, ignoring that Boruto was ignoring him.

"Use the recipes mom gave you!" said Himawari.

Naruto promptly returned to the kitchen, pulling out a big book from a cabinet and dropping it on the table with an audible, but not loud, "THUD". He opened the book, looking for the recipes he was confident he could do, mostly easy and quick, throwing the ingredients together and mixing them and stuff. Hinata rarely, if ever, offered to teach Naruto how to cook just enough to support himself. Since she adhered to the "good wife, wise mother" axiom/role, cooking was her duty, and then she gave Naruto this cookbook during the divorce proceedings.

"How about some curry?" he asked.

The kids replied with a joint "Yeah, sure, whatever, I guess, eh," response right as they heard someone knocking on the door like a perfectly timed cue in a sitcom.

"Is Gaara going to ask you to marry him?" Himawari asked. Naruto ignored her but admitted Gaara would make a good husband if he was into men.

Gaara was not at the door. Sarada and Mitsuki were. "Hello, Mister Hokage," said the latter.

"Um, hi," said Naruto. "What are you kids doing here?"

"My mom's still at the hospital and my grandma and grandpa are having a date night, so they sent me here," said Sarada.

"Well, they could've told me, but I was just about to make dinner," said Naruto. "Come on in, anyway."

Himawari bounced up onto the back of the couch. "SARADA!" she shouted, excited. "Want me to braid your hair tonight?"

"Sure!"

"You kids gotta help me out with this curry," said Naruto. The kids groaned. "Hey, all of you live here too-well, except for Sarada and Mitsuki-ya know? If it helps, I'll let you guys pick whichever you want to do, and you can have ice cream."

" *You* cook!" said Boruto.

"I haven't cooked for myself in a long time, I need some help," Naruto replied. "Your mother did all the cooking."

"So you need a wife to cook for you?" Sarada asked, disapproving.

"No, like I said, I haven't cooked for myself in a long time," Naruto replied, getting the rice cooker out. "I just need to get back to doing it."

"Screw it, I'LL do it," said Sarada, walking over to Naruto and the cookbook.

"Seriously!? You're going to help him!?" Boruto snapped.

"You're one to talk, taking your dad for granted like that after he spoiled you rotten!"

Himawari and Mitsuki went 'OOOOOH!'

"You haven't changed!"

"At least I *have* a dad!" Boruto shot back.

"Boruto, Sarada, that's enough!" said Naruto. "Come on, Sarada, let's get to work." With a waving gesture, he beckoned Sarada to join him in the kitchen. Huffing, Sarada stomped over to Naruto, who was putting on an apron. His hair had gotten a little longer, too, not ugly anymore. Naruto had her start with something easy, putting the rice in the cooker, while he cut up the chicken, checking the cookbook every now and again.

He was pleased to see her giving his instructions the attention they needed, even if the curry wasn't as hard to make. The rice that went in had to be measured just right, and the water level needed to be just as right, or the rice would either be too dry or too wet. Scooping some of the rice out of the bag, she ensured that the amount of rice in the measuring cup was perfect-a little too perfect, as Naruto found out, so he made her pour the rice with a little bit of overflow that wouldn't matter in the long run. In return, she helped him as he mixed the curry sauce... paste... because she'd helped her mom with that, before.

"Well, why didn't you tell me?" he asked.

"I was just tryin' to help," she answered.

"... Okay." He shrugged and put the chicken on the stove. "By the way, um... are you... are you okay?"

Sarada glanced up at him, then back at the sauce. "Is it... is it bad if I hate my dad?"

Naruto looked up, stunned gaze fixed on Sarada, who shrank like she was afraid he was about to yell and scold her. But he didn't. His stunned silence told her everything, and she kept going. "I feel like..."

I feel like I should be upset mom and dad are divorced, but I'm not. Actually, I feel kinda..."

"Glad?"

"Yeah, glad. Like, I don't know what came over them, but hearing my mom yell at my dad was so..."

"Surprising?"

"That, too," she said. "But I don't remember ever seeing her look really happy before, and now it's like, like, she's a different person, and I don't mean that as a bad thing."

"She once told me that when a girl falls in love, her heart can never change," said Naruto. "It sounded silly then, it still sounds silly. Fact of the matter is, your mom kinda made Sasuke fall in love with her."

"Do you think my dad provoked my mom into divorcing him?" Sarada asked.

"No, Sasuke's so damaged, he has a hard time with relationships period," said Naruto. "When he was a boy, he saw his entire clan slaughtered in front of him, by his own brother. It really messed him up."

"There's a but in there somewhere," Sarada remarked.

"But it doesn't excuse his later actions," Naruto confirmed. "And it doesn't excuse how he treated your mom. We're always given a choice in life; Right choices, wrong choices, and neutral choices. They can be good, evil, or neutral. Sasuke always took the wrong choice."

"Sounds like you've made some bad choices, too," said Sarada.

Naruto paused, then sighed. He had that coming, hadn't he? "Yeah, I guess," he answered.

"Did my mom make a bad choice?"

Naruto took a deep breath, gathering his thoughts. "... I think she did. But she'll probably agree with me."

"Sounded like she would," Sarada remarked.

"She deserved better," said Naruto. "There was a moment when I thought she was growing up, moving on from Sasuke, and then... and then, she just... couldn't. It was like some divine force was hindering her. And no matter what she did, she couldn't please anyone. The rumors that she was useless just spread, and I..." he sighed. "I didn't do enough to stop it."

"So... you..." She tried to think of something to say but drew a blank.

"She made her choice," he said. "Hopefully, she'll make a better one."

"That sounds kinda mean," said Sarada.

"It does?" Naruto was visibly surprised and unhappy with himself for making such a comment. "Sorry."

The conversation ended after that. Neither Naruto nor Sarada could think of anything to say, so they left it at that. There were still words exchanged, but they were recipe instructions and words of affirmation. The curry was finished in personal best time for Naruto, 20 minutes, coming out steaming hot. When dinner was ready, he called the kids to the table. Three out of four were at the table in a clatter of feet and scraping tables, but Boruto took his time. He had to get on his crutches and walk over to the table, gingerly, then sat down at his seat next to Himawari. Naruto sat at the head of the table.

"Well? Shall we?" Naruto asked.

" *Itadakimaaasu!* " the kids sang and dug in.

All except for Boruto. He picked at the curry, ignoring everyone else. Not even Mitsuki almost choking from eating too much and all the spices could grab his attention.

Naruto seemed to know what was wrong, though. He put his chopsticks down, turning to Boruto. "It wasn't your fault, son," he said.

"But I should've beat 'im!"

"He was more experienced," said Naruto. "Sometimes, experience beats raw talent. I've seen it myself."

"But I'm stronger than him!" Boruto replied.

"And he still injured you," Mitsuki interjected.

"And it made mom and dad not together anymore," Himawari sighed. "Why?"

Naruto scoffed a breath and held up his hands. To be honest, he did a lot of things spur of the moment, this was no different. Looking back at how all this started, he knew that something felt... off and/or wrong, but he didn't know what it was or how it got that way. He still didn't know! He hadn't had much time to really look back and process it. He did know that it mainly happened because of a nightmare that made his wife look worse than she really was, and a nervous marriage counsellor who let said nervousness get to him. What's past was past, and he had more to focus on than some mistakes he might have made. Although deciding to divorce his wife after their son was nearly permanently crippled was a scummy move.

"I don't think she'll want me back anyway," he remarked, emerging from his reverie.

"Yeah, I'll say," said Sarada.

"Because he made himself look like a jerk," said Mitsuki. "And he's going to marry Sarada's mom."

No one was laughing at Mitsuki's attempted joke, even though he kept smiling, as if unaware of the faux pas he'd made. He knew what he'd done but didn't care.

"Daddy, did you really divorce mom so you could marry Dr Haruno?" Himawari asked, desperate for comforting words.

"No, I didn't," Naruto replied. "Mitsuki's just trying to be funny-and failing, miserably." He narrowed his eyes and glared at Mitsuki. Then Naruto sighed. "I don't even know when I'm going to throw myself back out there. It... doesn't feel right, right now, y'know?"

"Okay, are you done? I'm hungry!" Mitsuki snapped.

"Hey!" Naruto barked.

"Is it true you're going to get rid of ninjas?" Himawari asked.

"I don't know," Naruto answered, picking at his curry. "Maybe... maybe it's time for ninja to go away.?"

"But what will the council do if they hear about this?" Sarada asked.

"The Council!?" Naruto scoffed, "What're *they* gonna do, those unelected old farts!? Complain to me about how they did it back in the day? 'Now see here, in my day, this is how we did things'-well, this ain't your day, old hag!

"And who gave them that power, anyway!? The people!?"

"Um, Lord Hokage..." Sarada trailed off, "I don't think a civilian council will work for us..."

"But two people don't make a council," said Mitsuki.

"If they just called themselves 'advisors', it'd be different, because that's all they are," said Naruto. He was right, he didn't have to listen to their opinions. Then he remembered he listened to the marriage counselor's opinion (after all, isn't a counselor like an advisor?) and divorced Hinata.

(Speaking of the marriage counselor, he frequently apologized to Naruto for his behavior in his first session with Hinata, but defended himself, saying that he was nervous in the Hokage's presence and that nervousness got to him. However, he still maintained that his opinions were right, but his actions were totally unprofessional. Naruto agreed, but forgave him.)

Then he also remembered that not all advice is the same.

"The real problem isn't that they're old," said Sarada, "The real problem is, they don't want to lose their grip on power, no matter how tenuous it might be. Good people don't want to be politicians, that's why bad people become politicians."

"And what about good people who become politicians?" Naruto asked as if expecting a 'gotcha' question.

"You should know, you have to deal with the bad people!" Sarada shot back, laughing.

But Boruto wasn't laughing. Picking at his food, he digested his father's words. The implications didn't escape him at all; his ninja career could be over before it truly began. Worse, his father was acting self-centered, like he was using Boruto's suffering for his own character development or whatever. That's not how it worked, according to Boruto's understanding of TV shows. Subsequent events could worsen his attitude.

Or, if he survived (after all, life is a gamble), with the right direction, he would at least see what things might have been like for his father. He didn't have to like it, of course. People change as they get older, that's a fact of life. Very few people are the exact same person they

are at thirteen or thirty, and if they are, there's usually a reason. Now, to be sure, personalities don't change too much, but you learn a lot of things, and they change your outlook on things. We learn things every day, and these affect choices we make, either positively or negatively. Naruto learned that Hinata loved him, so he made what looked like a good idea at the time, but time showed to have been not.

They finished their curry, cleaned the dishes, and retired to the couch to watch the latest episode of the "Gutsy Ninja" drama. The episode was reaching its climax. The enemy had the shinobi at his mercy, ordering him to give up, and RIGHT THEN AND THERE, the shinobi disappeared in a cloud of smoke and defeated the assassin with a single swipe of his hand. Boruto and Himawari (pausing in the middle of braiding and brushing Sarada's hair) went "oooh!", their eyes full of sparkles, their stomachs clenched.

" As long as we're cursed to live in this Ninja World, there can be no peace... ever!"

"Aw, screw you!" Himawari spat.

"He can't hear you," Boruto reminded her.

" Well... I'm going to break that curse one day. If there's truly peace in this world, then I am going to find it . I will never stop looking. "

"You tell 'im!" Himawari cheered, taking her hand away from Sarada's hair.

" Naruto! My name is Naruto! And I'll bring peace to the world!"

Cheers erupted from those invested, those being Himawari and Mitsuki. Boruto and Sarada did not react.

"Wait... haven't we seen this episode?" Sarada asked.

But Naruto cringed, leaning back against the couch. It was unintentional-the writers and producers of the drama were totally unaware of Jiraiya's expectations for his pupil, from what he gathered in meeting with them-but it was like the episode was taunting him about the success, or lack thereof, of his efforts to change the Ninja System for the better. His son was badly injured, yet another victim of a system that chewed up and spat kids out without caring, and another victim of the same system. He knew he failed. He imagined Jiraiya glaring at him, saying " *You failed me, and you failed your parents .*" And at this moment, he was desperate to avoid the awkward reminder of his failure.

Someone knocked on the door. Everyone had been so engrossed in the show, they almost jumped out of their seats. After sighing, Naruto stood and went to open the door, wondering just who would be visiting this late at night without even warning him ahead of time. So he was a little grumpy. But that grumpiness disappeared when he opened the door, and a smile replaced it, his face brightening like the sun.

"Iruka-sensei!"

The man in question raised his hand in greeting. "Hey, Naruto. How are things?"

"Made curry tonight," Naruto answered. "And we were just watching *The Gutsy Ninja .*"

"Did you like it?"

"The curry, or the show?"

"... Yes."

Naruto raised an eye. "Uh, I don't mean to be mean-"

"You're not being mean."

"Isn't it kinda late?

"Well, I just wanted to stop by and asked if you were up for a blind date."

"A blind date?" Naruto repeated.

"A blind date," Iruka concluded.

"Yeah, I dunno..." said Naruto. "I just got divorced a few weeks ago. I dunno if I'm ready."

Iruka's expression soured. "Oh," he said. A moment's pause and he continued. "Well, you should get back in the dating game soon."

"This early?"

"It can't hurt," said Iruka.

"But what if it does?"

"Yeah, I see where you're coming from," said Iruka. "Alright, how about this; just go on this one blind date, and see how it goes. Okay?"

"Just this one?"

"Just this one," said Iruka.

Sighing, Naruto crossed his arms, leaned against the doorframe, and thought about Iruka's suggestion. "When is it?"

"Tomorrow. Or in two days-"

"Alright, alright," Naruto interrupted. "Seriously, why should I-"

"Look, just... go on this one date, that's it," said Iruka.

"Will I regret it?"

"There's only one way to find out!"

Sighing again, Naruto tilted his head backward again. "I guess I can do it. No! You know what? I *will* do it, believe it!"

"That's the spirit!" said Iruka.

"This is the place, I guess," Naruto murmured. Looking up, the sign reading "Rahuru's" blazed with red fluorescent light, standing out in the middle of a busy stretch of restaurants and shops. Through the big glass windowpanes, he could see waiters in saree and kurta walking around, the place almost full. But he knew there was a table reserved for him and his date, so he could linger outside until his date arrived, according to Iruka-sensei's instructions/suggestions. Blushing, he turned away from the pedestrians, lowering the straw cone hat so no one could see him.

He smelled curry. He just had curry last night, and he was going to have more tonight. Should he laugh? Eh, it was interesting anyway. Didn't stop his heart from beating, nervousness.

A flash of pink appeared in the corner of his eye. He turned, smiling, happy to see the person approaching.

"Sakura!?"

"Naruto!?"

"What are you doing here?" Naruto asked, visibly happy to see her.

"I'm doing fine, thank you for asking," she replied.

"Sorry," he laughed. "I'm glad you're back at work."

"So am I," Sakura replied. "I diagnosed a patient's hemorrhoids today, and I felt so relieved to be back, you wouldn't believe it."

Naruto threw his head back and laughed.

"So what are *you* doing here?" Sakura asked.

"Eh, blind date," said Naruto, rubbing the back of his head.

"Oh, getting back in the game already?" Sakura asked coyly.

"Kinda," Naruto replied. "Iruka-sensei just said, 'give it a try', so... I guess I am."

"Nothing wrong with that," said Sakura. "You know, it's interesting, Ino said she set me up with a blind date right... now..."

They stood in silence, contemplating what was going on. Eyes widened, and the phrase "it doesn't take a math genius" was true in this case. And after that realization, shock turned to disappointment, then anger.

Not at each other of course, but the heat in their chests and faces were aimed at someone else.

"I can't do this," said Naruto. "No way."

"Me neither," said Sakura. "I'm sorry, so sorry. I, I have to talk to Ino about this."

"What was Iruka-sensei thinking?" Naruto asked.

"They both set this up," said Sakura.

"Yeah, I know," said Naruto. "I'll see you later, okay?"

"Okay," said Sakura. Without another word, they turned and walked away with the same feeling of disappointment. But what were they disappointed about to begin with?

Holy cow, I am so sorry this took so long. I want to thank everyone who patiently waited for me to get through my bullshit so I could finally update this fic. I had a LOT of things going on this past year;

life things, work, other WIPs, and writer's block. I even thought I would finish this chapter a week ago, but lost my progress. T_T

But yeah, I had to address some criticisms that had been made of previous chapters, and give people the Naruto/Sarada mentorship they wanted to see.

Also, just a reminder: I don't have a set schedule for updates. I'm not a machine, I have a life. Sometimes I want to write, but I don't have the energy. So PLEASE, stop asking me when I'm going to update, or worse, asking about this fic on my other fics in other fandoms. That's particularly rude. I WILL block you if you ask me those questions and will delete such comments if you leave them anonymously. These questions/reviews have made me consider dropping this fic, because I won't answer to entitled jerks. Remember, this is a hobby, and I have real life responsibilities. Thank you for being patient.